

The Prodigal God

DVD Transcript

There's a famous story in the book of Luke that for centuries has been known as "The Parable of the Prodigal Son."

It's a story about a son who takes his father's inheritance, wastes it all and then returns to a forgiving father. But it is a great mistake to think that this is a story about just one son. It's actually a tale of two sons. It's a story about a younger brother and an elder brother. We are meant to compare and contrast them, and if we don't compare and contrast them, we miss the radical message that Jesus is leading us to.

This parable undermines the existing paradigms, the existing categories we have for understanding our relationship with God. And there's something else very interesting about the story. For a long time there has been a simple formula a simple three act formula for telling a story. As you build the story you first begin with background information and setup, then you introduce the problem or the conflict, and finally, there's the resolution. But Jesus doesn't follow the rules here. Why? The clues come right the beginning of the first act.

The first act begins with a speech. The younger son comes to the father and says, "Father give me my share of the estate." Now, the original listeners the story would have been amazed at such a request. If you were a father and you had two sons and you died, your estate would have been divided – two-thirds to the older son, one-third to the younger son. Because the oldest son, in those days, always got a double portion of what every other child got. But this only happened when the father died. So when the younger son comes and says, "Give me my share the estate now" – while the father is still alive – It's basically to wish the father dead.

The younger son wants the father's things but not the father. He wants the father's wealth and estate, he wants the comfort and the prestige and the independence that goes with those things. But he doesn't want the father. He wishes the father was dead. That's unheard of. But even more unheard of was the father's response to the request. In the original listeners were amazed at the son's speech, they would have been even more amazed at how the father responded to what the younger brother said. An ancient Middle-Eastern father would have been expected to have driven the boy out of the house with verbal - if not violent, physical – blows. But this father does not do that. What does the story say? It says, "He divided the property between them." The Greek word used here for property is the word "bios." It means "the course of life" or "that which by life is sustained." So the story really says the father divided his life between them.

Why does it say that? The father's estate was his land. The father's wealth was his land. So the only way he could give his younger son one-third of his estate was to sell that land. In those days, people's very identity was bound up with their land. If you lost your land, you lost yourself. If you lost part of your land, you lost your status in the community which was tied up

to how much property you had. So what the younger son is asking the father do is this - he's asking him to tear his life apart. To tear his standing in the community apart. To tear himself apart. And the father does – “he divided his property between them.” Leaving him with two-thirds of the estate.

So the son takes his share and goes off and squanders everything he's been given. And he comes to the point where he's impoverished. Where he's been taken advantage of, and his life is an absolute ruin. And when he's literally in the pigsty, when he's literally down in the mud, he comes to realize what a fool he's been and he comes up with a plan. The first part of that plan is to go home. He says, “In my father's house there's bread to spare, and I'm starving here!” “I will go and confess to my father.” He'll go home. Now this is simple, and yet it's very profound. Home is not primarily a place – It's a relationship. It's where you belong. It's where you are accepted. And he longs to come home.

But there's a second part to this plan. He says, “I will go to the father and I will say, ‘Father, I'm not worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.’” This is not request to become a slave. Slaves worked on the estate, slaves lived on the estate. A hired man lived in town and had a wage. What he's actually saying therefore is that he wants to pay the father back. He knows that you did not come back into a community whose morals you have violated just through an apology. You had to make restitution. So he's coming to his father and saying, “Father, I don't want to be reinstated as a son.” I don't want the status of son ship.” I don't deserve it, I'm not worthy of it.” “I want to earn my way back.” “Make me like one of your hired men.” “I want to pay you back.” That's the plan. So he heads off – home. And the father sees him coming from afar off. Now, if you are a father, and you see your adult son coming, and this is a son who has harmed your family and has squandered a lot of your wealth – you see him through your window as you're sitting at your kitchen table - what are you going to do? You'll be sitting there and will just tap your feet and you'll say, “This better be good.” Maybe if he's abject enough, maybe if he grovels enough I might find my affection is rekindled.” “This better be good.” But what's the story say? This father, when he saw him coming from far off, he had compassion on him. And the father runs toward him. Runs toward him!

Now, ancient Middle-Eastern patriarchs did not run. Children ran, youth ran, women might run. But not fathers, not owners of the estate. That would mean picking up your skirts and bearing your legs and you just didn't do that. But, this father does. He shows complete emotional abandon. He runs to his son, he kisses him, and the Greek says, “He fell on his neck.” Now the son tries to roll out his restitution plan. But the father will have nothing of it. He says to his servants, “Come, put a robe on him.” “Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.”

Now, the ring is significant. It was a signet ring, it had the family seal on it. Back in those days you didn't make a contract by signing something, you put the family seal, from the signet ring on the contract. What is happening then is this. The son has said, “I don't want to be brought back into the family, I would earn my way back.” But the father is saying now, “I'm not going to

let you earn your way back, I'm going to bring you back." And so he confers son ship on him, like that, in a stroke. By sheer grace, he grants it and he throws a magnificent feast to commemorate the day that his lost son has come home.

Some people are like the younger brother. They want the things that God provides, but they don't want God. They want their independence, they want to live their lives the way they want to live them and they believe it will bring them happiness. And some of them, like the younger son, one day decide to go home. And because the father in the parable represents God, we are being told nothing less than this: no matter who you are, no matter how awful the stuff that you've done, if you come home, God will accept you, he will love you, and it's all by sheer grace. All of us are like the younger son - because when we first come to God we say, "I'm not worthy, I want to earn my way back. I want to try hard to pull it all together." And the biblical God will have none of it. He gives us the full rights of sons. He confers son ship on us through Jesus Christ. It's a standing, it's a status, and it's secure. We're accepted.

At the end of act one, everything appears be back to normal. The conflict has been resolved, the younger son has been forgiven by the father, the family is reunited, right? Not exactly there's one more character in the story we haven't met yet. He has not yet learned that the lost son has been found. Now, almost always, when people think of this story, it's all about act one - the younger son, his coming home, the father acceptance. And as a result, almost everyone thinks of this story in the most sentimental terms. We imagine the original listeners hearing this marvelous story of forgiveness and their eyes welling up with tears. But if you look at the context, if you look at the people Jesus was speaking to, if you look at Jesus' purpose in telling this parable, you'll realize that the original listeners were not wiping away tears from their eyes. They were thunderstruck, they were offended. Because Jesus' purpose in telling this parable was not to give us a sentimental message that somehow God will accept us no matter what we do. He is here to say basically this: that everything you've ever heard and everything you've ever thought about how to approach God is wrong.

The story continues in act two, when a new conflict arises as the father throws a feast. So Jesus continues, the older brother was in the field and when he came near the house he heard music and dancing." "So he called a servant and asked him what was going on and the servant replied. 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf for him because he has him back safe'" But the elder brother was furious. He was so angry that he refused to go in and join the feast. It was his turn now to assault the integrity of the family. He was saying, by not going in, "I will not be part of this family." "I will not. I'm the heir, and I don't want to be in the same family with him in it." This forced father to come out and plead with the elder brother. But he won't come. He's abrasive to the father. He says, "Look!" Notice he doesn't call him "father." He says, "Look! All these years I've been good. I've never disobeyed you. And when this son of yours that squandered your property comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him! I will not come in." Notice, he doesn't say, "my brother," he doesn't even say, "your son," he says, "this son of yours." He will not acknowledge being in the same family with him.

Now, the elder brother's furious, but he's particularly upset about the cost. You see in those days people do not eat meat at every meal. They didn't because it was so expensive, it was a great delicacy. But the most expensive delicacy of all was the fattened calf. And it was not the sort of thing you would do even for a private party. So when the father kills the fattened calf we know that meant the entire village would have been at that costly feast. But the elder brother is too furious to go in.

Now you don't need a PhD in psychology, if you were the elder brother, to realize that this was the greatest day in the father's life. In fact, the father, by killing the fattened calf and inviting the entire village to this feast, is showing that this is the greatest day in the father's life. Anybody could see that. The elder brother certainly sees that it doesn't matter to him. He doesn't care. All he sees is that the father is using his inheritance in a way that he doesn't approve of. So what does this elder brother care for? What does he really care about? He cares about the father's things, but he doesn't really care about the father. He cares about the estate, he cares about the expense of all this, he's worried about the fattened calf –he says, "why couldn't it have been a goat?" He cares for the father's things, but he doesn't care about the father's heart.

You see, when the father went out to plead with the elder brother he says, "My son you're always with me, and everything I have is yours." And that's the literal truth. Because when he divided his property between them, the younger son took his share and now it's all gone. And every single thing now that the father owns, the elder brother will inherit. He's the only heir, it's all his. And all he can see is his share diminishing as a result of the younger brother's return. So he's furious and he's humiliating the father on the greatest day of his life and he's making the poor father come out of his great feast and argue with him. But how does the father respond? Again, he responds tenderly and he says, "My son, I still want you in the feast."

And just as we were on the edge of our seats, just as we were asking the questions: How will the elder brother respond? And will the family be reunited in love? And will they all come together at the end? Jesus just ends the parable. He never tells us. Cliffhanger! Why? What is Jesus trying to get across? Much of the brilliance of Jesus' story lies in that in the first act we get a very traditional depiction of sin. You look at the younger brother and you say. "Yep, there it is. 'Insulting the father, lover of prostitutes, down in the pigsty, down in the gutter – dissolute, licentious, self-indulgent. Yep, I recognize that, that's sin.'" But when you get to in the second act Jesus has completely turned the tables. Here's what you see. You have two sons - one good, one bad. But they've both been alienated from the father. And you come to realize, they both want the father things but not the father. They've both been using the father to get the things they really love - which is the wealth and the status. But one has been doing it by being very very bad and the other has been doing it by being very very good.

See why does the older brother not go into the feast? He tells you. He says it. He says, "I have never disobeyed you." There it is. That's the reason - I'm mad. That's the reason why I'm not going in to the feast. In other words, the thing that is keeping him from the father is not his sin – it's his goodness. It's his righteousness. The younger brother was trying to get control by

leaving and disobeying, but the elder brother was trying to get control by staying and obeying. The younger brother was trying to get control of the father's things by breaking all the rules, but the elder brother was trying to get control of the father's things by keeping all the rules. And Jesus is showing us that they're both lost, they both are without a relationship to the father, they're both alienated from the father. And they're both alienated from God.

So there are two kinds of lostness. That's the reason Jesus put the elder brother in the parable. You can escape God as much through morality and religion as you can escape God through immorality and irreligion. There are a lot of people, there are a lot of Christians with an elder brother type of heart. If in your heart of hearts you say, "I try very hard. I try to be obedient. To the church. I pray. I try to serve Jesus. Therefore, God, you owe it to me to answer my prayers, to give me a relatively good life, and take me to heaven when I die." If that's the language of your heart, then Jesus is your model, Jesus is your example, Jesus is your boss, but he's not your savior. You're seeking to be your own savior. And all your morality and all your religion, it's all just a way to get God to give you the things you really want, and they are not God himself. Elder brothers obey to get things from God and if those things are forthcoming, they get very angry. But gospel believing Christians obey God just to get God, just to resemble him, and love him, and know him, and delight in him.

So the most stunning thing about this parable is the way it ends. The younger brother goes off but comes back, repents, humbles himself, goes into the feast and is saved. But the elder brother, the good man, the man whose kept all the moral rules is lost, as far as we know. And Jesus' listeners know exactly what his point is and if the complete reversal of everything they've ever been taught, everything they believe. You can almost hear them gasp as the story ends. The lover of prostitutes is saved and the man of moral rectitude is lost. Most of us think that God was good people. But Jesus shows us that God wants new people. We like to think that the good are saved and the bad is lost. But Jesus shows that they're both lost. And though they may look different on the surface, underneath they are exactly the same. We think that the way to be saved is to repent of your sins and Jesus shows us that you also have to repent of even the very reason you ever did anything good at all.

All the sudden, you come to realize who these two sons in the parable really are. Remember the context - there were two groups of people around Jesus when he began to tell the parable. Tax and sinners, Pharisees and teachers of the law. Now tax collectors and sinners are like younger brothers. They run off. They live any way they want. The Pharisees and the religious leaders are like the elder brother. They stay home, they comply, they are very good. And these two sons then represent these two groups of people in the parable so Jesus can tell us something about both.

In the parable we see the two basic ways that human beings try to make the world right, to make themselves right and to relate to God. One is the way of self discovery, one is the way of what we'll call moral conformity. The self discovery people say, "I'm going to live as I see fit, I'm going to determine what is right or wrong for me, I'm going to find my true self." The moral conformity people say. "I am going to be good, I'm going to try very hard, I'm going to comply

with the moral code." Both groups say, "This is what everybody should live." Both groups say, "This is what will make us all happy." But Jesus says, you're both wrong. You're both lost. And you're both far from home.

There are two ways to be your own savior and lord - just as there were two ways for the sons to try to get control of the father's stuff. One did it by being very bad, one tried to do it by being very very good. And in the same way there's two ways for us to try to get control of God and the people around us and our own lives. One is by living where we want, one is by trying to be very religious and moral. But both lead to lostness: both alienate us from the father.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is neither morality or immorality, it's neither religion nor irreligion. Nor is it halfway in the middle, it something else entirely. So whether you're a younger brother or an elder brother, you need to come home.

Jesus ends the story without a resolution. The parable is over before we even find out what the elder brother's decision is. So we never know what happens to this family. Why would a storyteller as great as Jesus and a story without a resolution? We know he wants us to compare and contrast the two brothers. But he also wants us to see ourselves in the story. He wants us to see that we need something that's missing in our lives, he wants to long for something, he wants us to seek something. He wants us to hope for home.

So how do we come home? If you're either an elder brother or a younger brother there's only one way home. Jesus says we need three things. First, we need the initiating love of God. The father goes out to both sons in order to bring them into the feast. He goes out to the first son and kisses him to bring him in. He goes out to the second son and pleads with him in order to bring him in. But he goes out to both. You'll never seek God unless he first seeks you. Secondly, we need to learn to repent for something besides just our sins. The younger brother comes home and he has many sins to repent of and we say, "See, that's how you get right with God." But remember, the elder brother never disobeyed the father, and yet was lost. So the point is this, Christians not only repent of their sins - of course the repent of what they've done wrong - but they also repent for the very reasons they ever did anything right. You need to learn not only to repent of your sins but also of your righteousness. Only then will you know that you transferred your trust from yourself to Jesus Christ for your salvation. But thirdly, we need to be melted and moved by what it cost to bring us home.

At the very beginning of Luke 15 there were the tax collector (younger brother sinner types) and the Pharisee (elder brother, religious types) around Jesus. And the Pharisees look at Jesus and say, "Why are you fraternizing with these sinners? And in the response Jesus tells them three parables. The first is about a lost sheep. There's a sheep that's lost and someone goes out and finds it and brings it home. The second is the parable about a lost coin. Someone goes out into the home and turns the house upside down and gets it back. The third story is the parable of the lost son. But nobody goes out to get him. No one goes out and searches and brings him home. It's very striking. Why? I believe Jesus is doing this deliberately to force us to ask the question who should have gone? And anyone in that culture would've known the

answer - it was the elder brother's job. The oldest son got the lion share of the estate. Why? In order to keep the family together, to keep the estate together. It was his job to make the family a family. And so in this story a good elder brother would've come to the father and said, "Father, my younger brother has gone off and now his life is in ruins. But I will search for him. I will find him, and I will bring him home at great expense to myself, even at great loss to myself." And, that's the key. When the father had divided his property between them, the younger brother got his share and it's gone - and that means that everything the father owns will be inherited by the elder brother. And so, in a sense, every robe, every ring, every fattened calf belongs to the elder brother. So when the father brings the younger son back into the family, he can only do that at the expense of the elder brother. It's not free. Somebody has to pay. Of course, for the younger son the restoration was free, it was all grace. But for the older son, it was immensely expensive; it cost him dearly.

We, the collective human race, we need a true elder brother. God cannot just bring us back into the family - adopt us, accept us, clothe us - except at the expense of a true elder brother. And the younger son in the story, unfortunately, gets a Pharisee for an older brother. But we do not. For us, there is a true elder brother. There is one who loved and obeyed the father completely. One who came to earth and loved God with all his heart, soul, strength and mind, and his neighbor as himself. One who earned everything - he earned the robe, he earned the ring, he earned everything. But at the end of his life, what do we see? He doesn't get a royal robe, he gets stripped. He doesn't get the fattened calf, he got vinegar. He doesn't get a ring of honor, he gets a crown of thorns. And this true elder brother comes to us and says, "I did it all for you." You couldn't be clothed unless I was stripped. You couldn't get the robe and the ring unless I lost them. I've earned them all, they're mine, but I freely give them to you."

Don't you see? In other words, salvation is absolutely free for us, but it is unbelievably costly for him. Jesus Christ puts a bad elder brother in the story so that we can long for the true one. We don't just need an elder brother who would go into the next town to bring us home. We need one who comes all the way from heaven to earth. We don't just need an elder brother who brings us back into God's family at the cost of his wallet. We need one who's willing to do so at the cost of his life. On the cross, Jesus paid the debt that we know deep down inside, we owe. On the cross he died for our wrongdoings and our self-righteousness so we can be brought home. He brought us home at infinite expense to himself. Have you been moved and melted by what your true elder brother did to bring you home? Because if you see that - to the degree you see that - it will change your entire approach to God. You won't be into moral conformity, you won't be into self discovery - you'll truly be a Christian.

Not only in ancient times, but also now, the main thing you did when you celebrated a homecoming or a family reunion was you ate. Because it's in those feasts, it's in eating, that you most feel at home. There is the place where your body gets what it needs - great food and rest. It's also in the feast that our hearts are getting what they need - they get laughter and support and community. The greatest feast, the greatest of fellowship, the greatest sense of well-being that you ever had; spiritually, emotionally, physically, are all just the dimmest hints of what your eternal future will be like when Jesus Christ comes back. And on that day the

father will fall on our neck and the true elder brother will open the door and welcome us in to the ultimate feast. According to the Bible, because of our true elder brother, God is someday going to make this world home again. And he'll wipe away all death, and wipe away all suffering, and wipe away all tears, and he'll give us new bodies that run and are never weary. And it will be the ultimate feast. Isaiah 25 says, "On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of the richest of foods for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine – of the finest of meats, the best of wines." "On that mountain he will swallow up death forever." "The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces." And in Matthew 8 Jesus says, "Many will come from the east and the west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the feast of the kingdom of heaven." That is your future.

What kind of people would we be if we could almost taste the ultimate feast? See, it's in the future, but what if it was a present reality to our minds and hearts? So that we could almost feel the father's kiss upon our necks? And almost taste the incredible food that someday will satisfy all desires? What kind of people would we be if it was that real to us? First, we would have a kind of quiet confidence. We would not be anxious about much of anything. We would be able to love people, even when it cost us, really cost us. And we would never lose hope, even if we lost some wealth or we lost a relationship or we were criticized. Because we know about this ultimate homecoming feast. What are you really finding your significance and security in? What are you looking for to satisfy the deepest needs of your heart for love and meaning? Is it your family, is that the most important thing? Is it your career, is that the most important thing? I don't know. But whatever it is, if it's not God, it may be a good thing, but it is not home. It can't bear the full weight of your soul. And if you ask it to do that, you will always be wandering, always traveling, and never home. Why does this story end the way it does? Unfinished? Jesus wants us to listen to him. Whether we're elder brother types or younger brother types, he's appealing to us. This is participatory theater – we're in the parable. So, come home. Whether you're a younger brother or an elder brother, come home. It's the place you were created for – the person you were created for. There is a true elder brother and he's inviting you to come home.