

# Prodigal Son



*By Deacon Reggie Bollich*

From the parable of the Prodigal Son comes to the heart and soul of the Good News of Jesus Christ. It is the longest and most famous parable of the entire Gospel message. As in all of Jesus' parables, to fully understand them, we have to ask a few basic questions. First, to whom is the parable being told? Second, what is the time and place setting? Third, what are the social mores of the times reflected in the events and characters participating in the parable?

To start with, the word prodigal, used as both a noun and as an adjective, means to spend money lavishly and recklessly. Jesus is telling the story of the Prodigal Son to the Pharisees and Scribes, members of the establishment of the day. The place setting is two locations; a prosperous farm owned by the father and a "distant land" visited by the younger son. The time setting surrounds a period of ancient history when table fellowship (or banquet etiquette) was crucial to status and the way of life. At the time of Jesus, who you dined with was exceedingly important because the meal was a very sign of acceptance. Who you invited to your table meant who you accepted into your family circle. In those days, the meal was sacred. It was believed that the people you invited at your table brought blessings upon your house and family. Jesus ate with a host of sinners including tax collectors, prostitutes, and zealots (religious or political rebels of the day) which was considered scandalous. In other words, the rejects of society would have brought 'blessings' to Jesus' house, at least in the mind of the establishment.

A wealthy landowner father has two sons; a grudgingly obedient older son and a defiantly rebellious younger son who preferred that his father be dead. It is a story about a father's warm reception given to the profligate son and a cold reception given the father by the older son. In this parable Jesus is at his classic best, turning the tables of the establishment upside down. All 3 characters are sinners. Each of them is guilty of breaking important cultural rules of the time. The younger son first commits a major sin by requesting his inheritance of the father, meaning he really wished his father was dead so he could have his inheritance. A Middle Eastern father at the time would have reacted to this request with an explosion of rage. Instead, the father does the opposite. He dramatically demonstrates divine love. Not saying a word, he simply divides his livelihood and gives to the younger son what he wants. No questions asked.

Disappointed in his son's behavior, the father swallows the insult and caves in to the boy. So, the son is granted freedom to reject the love of his father. So the first sin of the younger son teaches us that we have complete freedom to reject God and God's love for us. We are totally free to reject God's love for us.

After a few days the younger son packs up and leaves for "a distant land", which means he travels to the region of the hated Gentiles. There he squanders the inheritance on a life of loose living. Now most are tuned in right away on the loose living part, but that is not the sin. The real sin is twofold. First, an inheritance in the Middle East always represented the social status of the person, in this case the father, granting the inheritance. So, to waste the inheritance was a sign of what he thought of his family. The translation reads "he devoured your living with harlots (wasted the father's money on prostitutes)". So his sin is not immorality ... the sin is being wasteful. That's the sin.

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Our hang-up is that we tend to associate immorality with sexuality, but that is not the sin being identified here. The greatest sin here is living wastefully. So this sin is for allowing one's talent and skill to go down the drain without nurturing them, becoming more and more unlike the human that God longs for us to be, allowing time to go ill-spent without quality. A further point is noted. The younger son not only loses his inheritance, he loses his self-respect. By squandering his portion of his father's livelihood he also loses his family identity; thus rejected, he no longer belongs to the family.

Things get worse. Famine strikes the "distant land" where the son is still living and the boy no longer has any money. Strangely, he hires himself out to a local farmer to feed pigs. This is deadly serious. Jesus is piling onto the boy sin after sin where it is impossible for his religion to save him. In reality, there was no need to hire himself out. Synagogues had slush funds to assist those in need so all he had to do was go to his own people for help. Instead the defiant son chooses to feed pigs, taboo unclean animals, which was an illegal task under Judaic law. Further it is against the law for a Jew to eat pork. The Jews believed devils lived in pigs and the boy, having fed pigs, meant that he was feeding demons.

By this point, no Jew or family member would even acknowledge him. He was "deader than dead" as far as they were concerned. His crimes were considered heinous and they would not even talk to him. Things were not going well. While the pigs were getting fatter, he was starving further. He reaches the low point willing to eat pig food, the husks and pods eaten by pigs. No one offers him anything, not even pig food to eat.

Then the son comes to his senses. Now this is the point where most people will think the boy has a conversion experience. Not true. In the Greek text the words *kenosis* and *metanoia* would have been used to imply conversion. Neither word is used to describe conversion. But if the boy felt sorry, what was he sorry about? He was sorry because he was hungry and he was sorry that no one wanted to feed him. He was saying, "I am hurting, in bad shape, and I am sorry about that". Kind of like so many of our national leaders having to admit they are sorry for their indiscretions. No they're not. They are sorry for getting caught. The boy is not showing a sign of repentance, it was a sign of smartening-up. It is a sign that the younger son knew something about his father, about the nature of his father. He knew his father was good and would not turn him away. Yet, he did some terrible things and no one could take him back, not even his father, at least not legally. So the boy decides to leave the 'distant land' but first he better make a confession. So he probably writes, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants." At least being a slave will be better than I am now doing, he thought. He knew he could not ever return home to regain his old status. So he went back to the father to ask for a job as a servant.

Now to quote the most poignant, compassionate statement in the Bible, "But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had pity and compassion, and ran to the boy, clasped him in his arms, embraced him, and kissed him tenderly."

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The father, as good as he is, has just broken several serious laws. A Middle Eastern father would not be looking down the road because that was the task of the older son. Keeping watch for approaching travelers was a “life and death” serious task that was required to comply with the rigid Rules of Hospitality (law of the desert). You had to adhere to the rigid rules by keeping an eye for strangers to which your duty was to invite them to your home and give them food and a gift; the job of the oldest son. So here the father is doing the older son’s job. (Talk about co-dependent.) The father was yearning and hoping that his renegade son would return. Today was that day. He saw the boy coming and without even thinking, violates 3 social laws.

First, he runs to the son, implying recognition. In the Jewish world at the time, you did not recognize someone ‘deader than dead’. Second, he touches the son. By law you became a demon if you touched someone associated with demons. But the father did not care about laws; he embraced and kissed his son tenderly, a sign of forgiveness and reconciliation. But the boy did not notice that forgiveness and reconciliation already happened. Not aware he was forgiven, he whips out his confession.

But when the son fails to see that his father’s embrace and kiss superseded his request to be treated as a servant, something different occurs. **The complete rejection of the father by the son becomes the total acceptance of the son by the father.** The boy confesses “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ Quickly, the father jumps in before the boy can offer the last sentence. When the boy was figuring things out for himself all he was hoping for was a job as a servant. But before he can get around to ask, the father interrupts saying to his servants, “Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fatted calf and kill it for this son of mine has been dead and has come back to life. He was lost and is found.”

Who owns the best robe in the house? The father does and the best robe is the ceremonial one for special occasions, a symbol of dignity. The ring placed on his finger was a sign of worthiness and sandals on his feet symbolize freedom. Slaves were not allowed to wear sandals, only freed people wore shoes. The father refused to allow his son to come back as a slave. The younger son was treated with a kind of love that did not make sense in the eyes of the establishment.

The celebration began with the fatted calf, a sacred cow, that was specially fed and treated, even massaged, all year before being set aside for slaughter in thanksgiving to God for a successful harvest. The return of the lost son was more important to the father than serving the most special meal at the annual banquet.

A banquet celebration is a symbol of joy. Jesus offers here a vision of what heaven is going to be like; with the best food and finest wine being served, with music and dancing, and where the person who least deserves to be at the table is in fact the guest of honor. Heaven is a banquet for people who have absolutely no right to be there. That’s what we are doing here right now? We come together each Sunday, sometimes each day, to attend the banquet of the Lord. Right here where heaven meets earth at St Jules we assemble for a meal. Young people, teenagers, may not want to be here right now, wondering when will this man finally stop talking. But nevertheless

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you are here and someday you will more fully understand if you listened to anything today about the Prodigal Son.

Now for the older son, remember him. Good boy, ‘goody two shoes’, he was out working in the field and hears the music and shouts of dancing then calls to a servant, “what’s going on”. When told, the older son became indignant, angry, refused to attend. Banquets were very serious business, attending was a priority, and refusal to attend generally meant a calamitous consequence, an insult often punishable by death. (Dt 21:18). Again, the father acts uncharacteristically and pleads with his own son. He grovels at the foot of the son, something unheard of in the culture of Jesus’ time.

So the older son argues with the father from the point of view of being an obedient slave toiling day to day under the scorching sun laboring on the farm. “I have done ‘this and that’ you owe to me a small animal to celebrate with my friends, which you did not give.” The father replies “everything I have is yours, but your younger brother was dead and he has come back to life.” Then the father says something strange; “It was fitting to make merry and glad”, meaning “it was only right for me to do what I did for your brother”. Not so, not according to the social customs at the time. But God, as father here, transcends all those rules and regulations that we impose on ourselves because love is greater than all of the laws combined.

The younger son could not return, but even though he lost his innocence, he was yet welcomed by the father who reinstated him as his son because he was greatly missed and greatly loved by his father. This son's change from grief and guilt to forgiveness and restoration foreshadows the resurrection from the dead which Jesus makes possible to everyone who believes in him, a rebirth to new life from death.

The parable contrasts mercy with unforgiveness. The father, having been wronged forgave. But the oldest son, who had not been wronged remained unforgiving. Contempt led this son to isolation from the community of forgiven sinners. Jesus offers a clear picture of what God is like. He does not lose hope or give up on us when we stray. He looks out for our change of heart, wanting us to return. He rejoices in finding us when we are lost, welcoming us home.

God is about gift, it is his free invitation to us to be loved just as we are without having to struggle and gain His favor by acting as though we are slaves. His love is unconditional and He calls us to treat one another just as the father treated each of his sons. It does not matter which son we identify with. The truth is we are both. We are called to behave like the father toward everyone we meet, to anyone whose path crosses ours.

Here at St Jules you've heard it said that we are a church of sinners. that we invite and welcome all sinners to the banquet of the Lord, and under Fr Dan’s tutelage the numbers are being added. So remember, when you offer the sign of peace to the person next to you, peer into each other’s eyes knowing that you are peering into the eyes of a sinner.