

The Prodigal Son

The parable of The Prodigal Son (Luke 15) proclaims a message of great hope to all who have sinned and fallen short of the mark. It declares that the Father of all mankind has a deep and abiding love for His children and desires with all His heart to receive them unto Himself. Regrettably, it is one of the most misunderstood lessons among God's people today.

General Questions Regarding Parables

What is a "parable"?

The word "parable" comes from the Greek word "parabole" and means "likeness." It is derived from the Greek verb "paraballo" ("para," "beside," and "ballo," "to cast"). A parable is a comparison of two objects for the purpose of teaching. Although Jesus did not invent speaking in parables, it is significant that He is the only one who used them in the New Testament. At one time in His ministry, it was the only method He employed when speaking to the masses. (Mt. 13:34; Mk. 4:33-34; see also: Ps 78:2)

Why did Jesus speak in "parables"?

Although many in the professing Christian world believe He did so in order to make His point more clear, the opposite is actually true. Jesus Himself said as much. The scriptures reveal that the Messiah was once asked by His disciples why He spoke in parables (Mt. 13:10). He answered them by revealing that He did so to hide the meaning of His words from some who would hear them.

"Because it is given to you to know the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven, but to them it has not been given." (Mt. 13:11-15).

The gospel of Mark records Jesus' words this way.

"Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God: but unto them that are without, all these things are done in parables: That seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest at any time they should be converted, and their sins should be forgiven them." (Mk. 4:11-12 See also: Isa 6:9,10; Acts 28: 27)

Questions Regarding the Prodigal Son

To whom was Jesus speaking when He gave this parable?

The Biblical record indicates that Jesus was addressing the scribes and the Pharisees (Lk. 15: 1-3) when He told the story of "The Lost Son". However, it is reasonable to conclude that sinners who had come to see Jesus also heard His words—for it was about them that He spoke.

What prompted Jesus to speak this particular parable?

To better appreciate the answer to this question we need to understand the religious leaders He was speaking to. The scribes and the Pharisees were constant antagonists of the Messiah. They sought to discredit Him at every turn. During what is commonly referred to as His "Latter Perea Ministry," which took place just months before His crucifixion, Jesus was eating with what the scribes and Pharisees regarded as "undesirables." Simply put, His dining companions were "sinners." The religious leaders observing this were highly offended that the Messiah would associate with such people. As a result they began murmuring among themselves expressing their disgust at Him for doing so (Lk. 15:1-2).

At this point it is also important to understand that these religious leaders were brazenly arrogant. They would often tout their own righteousness while at the same time condemn others. In the parable of “The Pharisee and the Publican” (Lk. 18:10-14), a Pharisee actually belittles a tax collector when praying to the Father in heaven. During this prayer this religious leader had the audacity to thank God that he (the Pharisee) was not like all the wretched people around him.

Now, once again, as they witness Jesus showing compassion to those whose lives were scared by bad decisions and hard living, these “pious” men declare their disdain for those who sought out the Messiah. They see no redeeming qualities in these people. Furthermore, they see Jesus’ lack of discernment as further evidence that He is not a true man of God.

This is clearly what was taking place at this moment. In essence these spiritual pillars of Judaism were doing three things: 1) They were asserting their own righteousness. 2) They were condemning others who clearly had some serious flaws in their lives and, 3) they were questioning the wisdom of Jesus for showing compassion to such people while at the same time failing to show honor to them.

Jesus responded to this by offering a trilogy of parables in which the first two (“The Lost Sheep” and “The Lost Coin”) expose the hypocrisy of the Pharisees grumblings. The third parable then presents them with a chilling reality of how distant their judgement was from that of God’s. In the parable of “The Prodigal Son” Jesus tells a story about a sinner who repents, a father who forgives, and a brother who 1) asserts his own righteousness, 2) condemns his sibling for past mistakes and 3) questions the wisdom of a father for showing mercy to a sinner while at the same time failing to show honor to him. While some in God’s church hold up the older brother as a model of honor to a father, he is in fact nothing but a resentful child that cared little about anything but himself.

What evidence in this parable suggests that the father knew his lost son would ultimately return home?

Three Reasons

There are certain things that occur in this story that suggests the father anticipated the return of his son. First, the father saw his son “when he was still a great way off” (Lk. 15:20). This being the case, how could he even recognize his son at such a great distance? How could he know that the small figure on the horizon was actually his child? In truth a loving parent can easily do this without difficulty. Anyone who has had children can attest to this. You may not recognize friends or acquaintances from a distance but your own child is something far different. A loving parent is so profoundly connected to his children that he can recognize them in a crowd. However, this brings us to another question: why was the father looking out on the horizon in the first place? There can be only one answer. He was looking out in the hope of seeing the son he loved so dearly. Something in him just knew his child would come home. But there is more.

A Second Reason

The powerful story Jesus tells indicates that the father was “moved with compassion” and ran out to meet his son (Lk. 15:20). The word compassion in this verse implies pity. The question we need to ask ourselves is why would the father pity a son he had only seen from a great distance? What would make him think his son would even need his pity?

The implication although not stated directly, is that the father knew that the world to which his son had gone would be treacherous and evil. As such it had the potential to cause his child great harm. Because he had a keen awareness of both his son and the world in which he was going, the father rightly anticipated the result. Many parents today can identify with this. They see their children boldly pursue things that they (the parents) know will only bring pain and heartache.

It is clear that the father allowed his son to go into that world in order to learn a lesson that could not be fully appreciated by staying at home. Although the son left the father's estate of his own volition, he did so with his father's consent. This is not unlike God's children today. Many have left the faith only to return again and seek out God's forgiveness and mercy. God is not surprised when His children return. He is filled with joy.

A Third Reason

Another indication that the father knew his son would return is that he had a fatted calf ready to be slaughtered for a great feast (Lk. 15:23). This being the case it is reasonable to think that the father must have anticipated a celebration would be held. The lesson for God's people today is that the Father knows His children so well that He can plan for their return even when it doesn't look like there will be such an event. With this said, imagine what He has in store for us.

Was the older son justified in feeling cheated by his father?

According to the parable, the older brother was angry with his father for honoring a son that he (the older brother) believed deserved no honor. This resentment was driven by nothing other than selfishness, which is never justified. If one thinks about it, the older sibling was reflecting the same attitude as the religious leaders Jesus was speaking to. They too were offended that Jesus would dine with highly flawed people. Obviously, Jesus wasn't.

Note: One of the great mistakes made by many of God's people today is to sympathize with the older brother. Some believe that this parable actually vindicates him because the balance of the estate will go to him. The question we must consider is what ultimately happens to the prodigal? Is he left with nothing? The answer to this question is revealed in the gifts the father bestowed on him.

What is the significance of the gifts (sandals, a coat, and a ring) the father bestowed on his son after his return home?

According to the parable, the father ran out to embrace his son the moment he saw him. The lesson we can learn from this is that as soon as a sinner's face is turned homeward, even though he may still be far away, our Father in heaven recognizes this change of heart, and bounds out to meet the child He so dearly loves. God doesn't say, "Let this sinner come to Me and beg for my mercy." On the contrary God moves quickly with delight when He sees a child return to Him.

Additionally the father fell on his son's neck and kissed him (v 20). Consider what must be taking place here. The son was unquestionably filthy. The smell of garbage and pig slop must have been intense. But did the father care? Of course not! His son was a WONDERFUL sight to Him and nothing could diminish that.

Four exquisite Gifts

When the prodigal returns in tears to his father, he begs him to allow him to work as a servant on the family estate. But the father would have none of this. His reaction speaks volumes about how God views genuine contrition and repentance. This wonderful patriarch provides his son with exquisite gifts—each of which tells an extraordinary story of distinction and honor.

"Put sandals on his feet"

The sandals picture freedom. Slaves at that time were barefoot. And although the prodigal wanted to be a servant, the father saw him as much more. He was a son and his father cherished him greatly. It is interesting that although God's people are referred to as servants (Rev. 7:3), they too are much more. At the end of His life Jesus called His disciples "friends" (Jn. 15:15). Ultimately they will be His bride.

“Put a ring on his finger”

The Bible also indicates that God’s people are to hold positions of great distinction in His kingdom (Rev. 5:10). They will actually sit on thrones and govern the entire world (Rev. 20:4). This wonderful truth is also captured in the story of “The Prodigal Son.” When his repentant son returns, his father gives him a ring. A ring is a symbol of power and authority (Est. 8:10). It actually carries the weight of the one who gives it. Pharaoh bestowed such an honor on Joseph (Gen. 41:41-42). And God Almighty will do the same to His bride.

“Bring him the best robe”

In addition to giving his son sandals and a ring, this loving father directed his servants to bring him a coat. But not just any coat. It had to be the very finest for his dear son (Lk.15: 22). The scriptures speak prolifically concerning the significance of garments. Bestowing such a gift was not only a sign of distinction and honor, but also a reflection of intimacy and affection. Jacob set his son Joseph apart from his other children with an exquisite garment (Gen. 37: 3). Hannah, the mother of Samuel also brought her son a coat every year when he served in the temple under Eli (1Sam. 2: 19). Mordecai was also given this distinction (Esther 8:15).

But why would the father give such an important gift to a son who had brought such great shame on the family? This is a question that must have been on the lips of older brother. The reason can only be that the father saw a state of heart in his son that was worthy of honor. The book of Zechariah records that God does this very thing to the priest Joshua (Zech. 3:4-5). Although we may not fully grasp God’s desire to raise up the fallen, it is a part of His nature never the less.

He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth up the beggar from the dunghill, to set them among princes, and to make them inherit the throne of glory: for the pillars of the earth are the LORD’s, and he hath set the world upon them. (1 Sam.2: 8)

A Great Feast

The last gift the father bestows on his son is a great celebration. The joy of his return just had to be shared with others. Now consider the significance of this act as it pertains to those who repent and appeal to God for mercy. The book of Revelation provides a brief glimpse into a wonderful celebration given in honor of Christ and His bride.

And a voice came out of the throne, saying, Praise our God, all ye his servants, and ye that fear him, both small and great. And I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings, saying, Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth. Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honor to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready. And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints. And he saith unto me, Write, Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb.

This great wedding is a celebration of redemption’s victory over sin. It is arguably the happiest moment in history. Although the scribes and Pharisees could not grasp how the bride makes herself ready, Jesus could. Those sinners who sought out the Messiah took a monumental step in that direction. Jesus knew precisely what was taking place when He received these prodigals that sought Him. He also knew that His Father in Heaven was preparing a wonderful array of gifts for them. Included among these gifts was a ring, a beautiful garment, a pair of sandals and a great feast.

Based on this parable, do you think a person can lose (squander) part of his reward?

There are many sincere members in God’s Church that argue this very point. They do so based on the fact that in the parable, the younger brother squandered his inheritance, while the older brother had not

yet received his portion of the estate. Furthermore, the words of the father declared that the balance of the estate would go to the oldest son: "Son, you art ever with me, and all that I have is yours" (Lk. 15:31).

With this said, it is important to understand that what is mentioned here is an "inheritance" not a reward. Ostensibly what the father was telling the older son was "Why are you so angry? You have lost nothing." For those who believe this parable stands as proof that one can lose his reward by walking away from the faith and later genuinely repenting and coming back, consider the following question. Can someone actually receive his reward during this life, because that is what would have to take place according to the parable? In other words can you name something a loyal member of God's Church could receive in the Kingdom that was already given to a former member of God's Church during this life?

"My Reward is With Me"

The Bible tells us that Jesus will bring His reward with Him, not give it out to those who want it now. This being the case, we need to understand what is truly taking place in this parable. In truth, Jesus is not talking about rewards or even inheritances for that matter. He is talking about mercy triumphing over judgement. God the Father is the merciful One. The Pharisees and the older brother are the ones who resent mercy.

The mistake being made by many in God's Church today is that they read something into the story that has nothing to do with the point Jesus was making when giving it in the first place. The Messiah's point is that God is a loving Father who desires with all His heart to FORGIVE His children. When He does, they are made whole—with all the privileges of a member of the family. To those who sympathize more with the older brother consider what truly lies ahead for these two sons if nothing changes from this point.

In reality the ultimate fate of the prodigal will be far greater than that of the older brother, and for good reason. The prodigal will occupy a position of great authority in the Kingdom because he can fully appreciate the value of mercy. That is the POINT! The prodigal is the one who will sit on a throne in the Kingdom—because he will judge like his Father judges.

Here is one last thing to consider: Who do you think would make a better judge in God's Kingdom, the older brother or the Prodigal? The answer should be obvious.

A Final Thought

It is interesting that the father in this parable actually went out to meet both of his sons. The reaction of the younger was to beg for his father's forgiveness and to tell him that from this day on he would comply with all of the father's desires. He would even be his slave.

However, the reaction of the older brother was much different. When his father came out and implored him to come into the house, he would not. In essence, he refused to honor his father's desire to rejoice with him. The irony of this is too powerful to ignore. As the story ends the older brother has now become a prodigal himself while the younger is once again a son.