

Text: Luke 15:11-32

Introduction: Parable¹

Today, we are learning about Jesus as a teacher, and a teacher who uses parables.

Parables are teachable moments because they are simple stories that common people can relate to and understand. Parables tend to be brief, have a limited number of characters, and the ending is usually not what the listeners are anticipating.

Parables are easy to understand and follow because it uses common language, imagery, understandings, and metaphor of the hearers—it is contextual. The meanings, though, can be complex and subversive. Sometimes Jesus is down the dusty road before the listeners understand he was actually talking about them. They probably wish they could launch something at Jesus from a great distance.

[GC-surgical tubes launching water balloon]

Jesus is a master storyteller.

A parable comes from the Hebrew term *mashal* and is based on a Hebrew and Jewish foundation, in contrast to fables, which are Greek/Hellenistic in orientation. The power of a parable is its ability to focus truth within a specific story; a fable does not move within the realm of historic possibility.

[Super Bowl commercial – turtle and hare—Mercedes Benz]

The parable is that “aha” moment. It personifies, dramatizes, and stirs the emotions of the listener. The hearer often identifies with or character or action, and then in the end the parable turns everything upside down. The parable invokes emotion.

The Prodigal Son

Which leads us to the focus for today: The Prodigal Son found in Luke 15.

¹ Material on the definition of parable (listed here in the introduction) is adapted from the Year of the Bible materials Waterford Mennonite Church is using, which comes from Prof. Marion Bontrager for Hesston College’s BibLit class.

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Jesus uses familial language in order to invoke the greatest emotion and identity to the story—the story is powerful because it is personal, relatable, and contextual (meaning that it uses images and metaphor that are familiar with the audience).

A father has two sons. The word "father" here is describing the familial relationship; it is also contrasting the image of "father" as authoritarian and legal control in the Roman world, with the counter-emphasis on care and compassion in the Lukan world.²

This is a parable of contrasts.³ The younger son's request is clearly a rejection of the family; The Father generously gives more than is required in Jewish custom. The younger son lives in the Gentile (non-believing world); the Father is a respectable Jew. The younger son shames his Father (Proverbs 28:7); the Father responds with kindness. The younger son acts as if he wants his family dead; the Father waits longingly on the porch waiting for his son's return. The younger son returns, shamed; his Father turns the son's shame into his own, bringing honor to the son.

And, the older son is angry; the Father is full of compassion, again.

What kind of people are we? Are we the younger son? Are we the older son? Or are we the compassionate Father?

Jesus told this parable to the scribes and Pharisees—you know, those hard working, rule following, "never sinning", righteous people. And as Jesus left and walked down the dusty road it hit the Pharisees like a ton of bricks: Jesus was describing them, for the scribes and Pharisees represent the older son.⁴

In what ways are we like the older son? Proudful. Condemning. Judging. Angry. And where does it stem from? Perhaps from the belief that we have to be perfect in order to be obedient? Perhaps the belief that we have to be perfect in order for God to love us? And so we work hard at obeying the rules. We work hard at being perfect. But it's a lie, of course, but a lie we

² Joel B. Green, "The Gospel of Luke," in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. Gordon D. Fee, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 579.

³ *Ibid.*, 580-581. The paragraph following the statement, "This is a parable of contrasts," includes information gleaned from Green's commentary. The footnote is to designate the entire paragraph.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 586.

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hold tightly to our chests, guarding our secrets so as to not expose the shame and guilt we have. We *act* as if everything is ok. But my friends, everything is not always ok.

You see, I used to think that God was either always mad or always sad. And at the bottom of my own brokenness the lie to be perfect was exposed and my worldview was blown to bits. I had been trying to be obedient out of fear.

I had the perspective held by the older son.

But we need to wrestle with the fact that at the end of the parable there is a complete reversal of fortune.

The older son does not come into the party.⁵ The Father, again submitting to humiliation (since he was the host of the party he should not have left) seeks out the older son; the father has compassion. The older son does not recognize his brother or his father, and just like the younger brother at the beginning of the parable, the older brother essentially acts as if his family is dead. The older son shuns cultural norms: refusing to come to the party, failing to address his father as father, stressing his servitude towards his father, and complaining of maltreatment.

These are all actions that are similar to that of the younger son in the beginning of the parable.

Sometimes we are like this older son!

And the Father—exhibited the same compassion, the same love, the same kindness; he endured the same humiliation, the same shame, and the same dishonor.

The Father shows compassion, again!

[My Story—Men's Prayer Group]

⁵ Green, 584-586. The footnote here again is designated for the entire paragraph that follows the statement, "The older son does not come into the party." Green compares and contrasts the older son and the younger son, and the consistent, compassionate response from the Father.

Compassion. Love. Grace. Grace turns everything on its head; it's the upside down kingdom, the last shall be first and the first shall be last.

Grace is scandalous.

It is surprising, unexpected, overwhelming, moving, stirring, uplifting, redeeming. Grace saves, vindicates, absolves, delivers, reclaims, discharges and honors.

Grace is scandalous.

Grace—it cannot be earned. It's free. It's merciful. And it brings honor to those that are shamed. It is unmerited favor. You can't buy it. You can't earn it. When judgment is demanded, mercy is given.

Grace is scandalous.

The key point in this passage is the verb "I will rise" when the younger son "came to himself" as he sat in the filth and degradation of being totally unclean.⁶

The younger son repents.

It begs us to ask this question: where have we been unclean? Do we recognize it? Do we recognize our need to turn back?

The verb "I will rise" is the central verbal form in this chapter.⁷ It marks the onset of a new series of actions through which lost status will be restored; it signifies a turn from death towards life. Hallelujah!

The younger son repents.

And this is the key: it is the younger son's action of returning, not his confessing, that make reconciliation possible.⁸ The son's confession is actually cut short from what he rehearsed because the Father had already launched into a full restoration of family status.

⁶ Green, 581

⁷ Ibid., 582.

⁸ Ibid.

Grace is scandalous.

[Story of Gary]

What would it have been like for Gary had the community reacted differently? Or, how would my life have been different if the community responded differently to me? Folks, God is love, and God loves us, and we most often experience this in community. And community can either give life, or give death. What is the picture we have of God? Is God mostly mad? Or is God love, full of mercy and grace?

In the parable, the Father runs. Having a wealthy Jewish landowner running down the street was unheard of. It shames the father. The very public embrace of his son shows restoration of the son whose own efforts were to shame his father.⁹

The Father ran to the son, the son that mocked him, shamed him, and humiliated him.

The one that was lost had now been found. And a party breaks out. God celebrates us, loves us, and wants the best for us.

Grace is scandalous.

In the same way at the end of the parable, the Father went out to the older son, the son that also ended up mocking him, shaming him, and humiliating him.

Grace is scandalous. And Grace comes from LOVE.

Henry Nouwen writes:

In our world of loneliness and despair, there is an enormous need for men and women who know the heart of God, a heart that forgives, cares, reaches out and wants to heal. In that heart there is no suspicion, no vindictiveness, no resentment, and not a tinge of hatred. It is a heart that wants only to give love and

⁹ Green, 583.

receive love in response. It is a heart that suffers immensely because it sees the magnitude of human pain and the great resistance to trusting the heart of God who wants to offer consolation and hope. The Christian leader of the future is the one who truly knows the heart of God as it has become flesh, 'a heart of flesh,' in Jesus. Knowing God's heart means consistently, radically, and very concretely to announce and reveal that God is love and only love, and that every time fear, isolation, or despair begins to invade the human soul, this is not something that comes from God.¹⁰

Today in our midst are broken people and healed people. You might be the one broken—reach out to your neighbor. For here in our midst are those called to offer healing, love, and grace. Or you might be the one healed—offer your gift of life to those that need it! The Christian leader that Nouwen is describing is not just the people that come up on this platform. It, in fact, is describing all of us, all of you.

We can't live life solo. We need the community. We need each other.

In a moment we are going to have a time of anointing. If you want to be anointed with oil, you are welcome to go to one of the stations where you will be anointed on the forehead in the sign of a cross, and you will hear the words, "God loves you."

Maybe we are we like the younger son—broken; or full of shame; or we have made bad choices; or maybe we have even openly rebelled and consciously walked away from God. If so, God is waiting on the porch with longing eyes, straining to see the familiar figure appear on the horizon. And when you turn back, God *runs* to you saying, "Daughter of mine, you are loved, welcome home; son of mine, you are loved, welcome home."

God loves us.

Or maybe we are like the older son: Judgmental; Condemning; Angry; Hateful; and we need healing from self-righteous attitudes, or self-condemnation.

¹⁰ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*, (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1989), 37-38.

God loves us.

Or maybe life is going great, and we identify neither with the younger son or the older son. But we still need to hear: God loves us. Maybe you identify with the Father and if so, offer your gifts to others!

All are welcome to come and receive an anointing.

God loves us!

Pray with me.