

The Prodigal Son's Brother

A sermon by Rev. Jeff Smith

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When kids watch movies and read books, they tend to associate themselves with the hero, the good guy, the one who saves the day, the one who gets the bad guy—just watch out for those kids that like to identify with the bad guys Well, this usually goes for adults as well – in our imaginations we like to put ourselves in the place of the hero and fantasize about what it would be like to save the world from impending doom. In school, the kids learn stories from the Lord's Word, and it's inspiring for them to imagine being “the one who listened to the Lord and saved the day.”

We know that those characters—those historical people—are actually real symbols of the many spiritual states and experiences that we pass through. Even from moment to moment, in a given day, we can pass through more heavenly ... and also less heavenly spiritual states. In our experience, these states show up as emotions and thoughts that pop into our heads—all in reaction to things that happen *around* us and *to* us. Sometimes we have sheep-like states, and sometimes goat-like states. Sometimes we are David, and sometimes we are Saul. Sometimes we are the Pharisees, and sometimes we are the woman caught in adultery. Choose one of any of the hundreds of people in the stories of the Bible, and you are likely to have passed, or will pass through some spiritual state represented by that Biblical person while on your spiritual journey of regeneration.

Today, our story has three characters for us to relate to. The parable is sometimes called the Lost Son, or the Prodigal Son. But before we get into the parable, let's first get some context for our story.

Jesus is passing through a region referred to by historians of that time as *Perea*. It's on the “other” side of the Jordan from Jerusalem and Jericho, on the East side of the river. Jesus spends some time in this region on His way down to Jerusalem from the north in the last few weeks of his life.

The situation here is that Jesus is spending some time with tax collectors and sinners—two categories of low-lives at that time. The Pharisees, of course, disapprove of this situation—they treat those low-lives almost like a disease to keep their distance from. So, Jesus responds to the Pharisees with three parables: the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and this story, the Lost Son, or the Prodigal Son. By the way, a quick language lesson for you, the English word “prodigally”, as in “living prodigally” is translated from the Greek word *asotos*, which is an adverb that means “wastefully” or “not savingly”. So, the lost son is living wastefully, or living not savingly, or could even be understood as “living in a condemned manner”. It all fits in this situation.

And now to the story itself. There are three main characters: a younger son, an older son, and a father. Maybe you have already thought about which one most resonates with you and which one you feel most aligns with your approach to life and how you relate to people. I invite you also, as we go, to consider the ways that you may be like *each* one of these characters, and what this means for your spiritual journey.

The younger son. In the parable he asks for his inheritance, which would be one-third of his father's estate—the older son would get two portions of the inheritance, thus two-thirds of the estate. The younger son goes off to spend his inheritance and live “wastefully” or “unsavingly”. Echoing the language of the other two parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin that Jesus told to the pharisees, the younger son is surely “lost”.

New Church teachings describe the prodigal person as one who has spiritual riches, thus the ideas and principles of what it means to live a good life, but they waste these true ideas through their life choices. So, it's a person who isn't *lacking* spiritual knowledge, but rather one who misuses it. Allow me to offer just a few examples.

It could be like a spouse or parent who misuses the idea of doing their job honestly, justly, and faithfully in order to justify their absence from family life.

Or like being solely focused on useful actions to others while denying emotional or spiritual care to oneself.

Or the mis-application of the judge-not principle, either deflecting what would otherwise be constructive criticism of oneself, or withholding healthy judgment of the moral standards in society because "only God can judge."

Living prodigally means taking a healthy spiritual idea and applying it in a spiritually unhealthy way so that, instead of helping oneself or others to heaven, the way is hindered. The lost son ends his perdition with humility. He realizes what an idiot he has been and he returns home ready to be a servant in his own father's house. Now *that* is repentance.

There is another type of prodigal son that would be useful to talk about here, and that is the people that we *perceive* as being lost, and this could be either lost on their way to heaven, or simply lost to us. There may be people who leave your life, maybe through an argument, difference of opinion, or an actual offense. This person could be out of your life for a day, a month, or several years. They may be lost because of their doing—meaning they make no effort to communicate with you; or they be lost because of your doing—meaning you make no effort to communicate and/or avoid communicating with them. So, do you resonate with the lost son character?

And now on to the older son. He's the responsible one. He stuck around for the family. He is dedicated to his father's house. He was working in the field when the party for the younger son started. Why ever did he get upset when he came in from the field? Was it because his brother returned? Or was it because of the celebration for his brother? Or maybe was he upset that his own inheritance was being used on this prodigal—this wasteful one? Did his own self-righteousness get in the way of him seeing the humanity of his own brother?

These are important questions to ask, because we could ask ourselves the same ... what holds us back from loving and welcoming someone in our lives? What holds us back from reaching out to someone with whom our relationship has soured? Does our sense of right and wrong get in the way of us giving someone a second chance and maybe showing some humility ourselves?

Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying the older brother is a bad guy. And, by the way, the older brother was working in the field, which for us is a symbol of performing external good acts. And a final note about the older son is his father's words to him, saying "You are with me always, and all that I have is yours." It does seem that the older son is a decent guy, but maybe with some room to grow in the area of love and forgiveness.

Let's move on to talk about the father now. The father, of course, is the example that we are supposed to live up to. He is forgiving, he is joyous, he saw his younger son coming afar off and ran out to welcome him home. Was he watching for him day after day? He fell on his neck and kissed him. And notice what he didn't do as well: he didn't stop him at the entrance to ask his intention; he didn't say I told you so; he didn't lecture him ... at least not right away; he didn't compare him to his brother. He welcomed him home with love.

What the father does next are symbols of ways that we can come back into a relationship with the Lord, or help somebody else come back into that relationship, or ways that we can try to amend relationships of our own that have gone fallow.

The father brought the best robe for his son: this symbolizes important and basic true ideas that provide comfort and warmth for someone who was lost. You can tell a lost friend things like this: the Lord loves you and always wants you back. I love you, and I want what is best for you. We are going to get it wrong sometimes, but that shouldn't stop us from trying to get it right.

Then the father put a ring on the finger and shoes on the feet: these symbolize putting what we know into action, both outwardly and inwardly. This is so important because this is what regeneration is—and this is what it means to be a good person—and this is what relationships are built on in the first place—two people who are each doing their best to be better people. Without that it's just two fake people who are living for themselves and nobody else. If you really want to repair a relationship with the Lord, or with another person, the only way to do it is by putting some truths into practice in your life.

Finally, they brought the fatted calf and then ate and were glad together. This is the result of the work we do. Reconnection and making amends with the Lord or with a neighbor can be really hard, but it's worth it. Your life will be all the richer for it, and so will theirs.

The parable ends in a very open-ended way. After the father's loving words to the older son—"All that I have is yours"—the parable just kind of ends. We don't know if the older son decided to join the party or not. It's like one of those old choose your own adventure books, except the choice is made in *our* lives. It's great to be obedient, out in the field practicing charity, and we are with the father and have his inheritance by putting the truth first, but the real party with the fatted calf comes from, not disposing of the truth, but putting love first, and opening up our hearts.

Amen

Readings:

Luke 15

Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him to hear Him. 2 And the Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, "This Man receives sinners and eats with them." 3 So He spoke this parable to them, saying:

[Parable of the Lost Sheep and Lost Coin]

11 "A certain man had two sons. 12 And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the portion of goods that falls to me.' So he divided to them his livelihood. 13 And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions living prodigally. 14 But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in that land, and he began to be in want. 15 Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. 16 And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything.

17 "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! 18 I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, 19 and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants." ' "

20 "And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. 21 And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

22 "But the father said to his servants, 'Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. 23 And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; 24 for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' And they began to be merry.

25 "Now his older son was in the field. And as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 So he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. 27 And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and because he has received him safe and sound, your father has killed the fatted calf.'

28 "But he was angry and would not go in. Therefore his father came out and pleaded with him. 29 So he answered and said to his father, 'Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends. 30 But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him.'

31 "And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. 32 It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found.' "

AE 279.6

The father said of the prodigal son who returned penitent in heart, Bring forth the first robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring hither the fatted calf and kill it, that we may eat and be glad (Luke 15:22, 23). One who is acquainted only with the sense of the letter believes that no deeper meaning is contained in this than appears in that sense, when yet every particular involves heavenly things; as that they should "put on him the first robe," that they should "put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet," that they should "bring forth the fatted calf, that they might eat and be merry." By "the prodigal son" those who are prodigal of spiritual riches, which are the knowledges of truth and good, are meant; "his returning to his father, and his confession that he was not worthy to be called his son," signifies penitence of heart and humiliation; "the first robe with which he was clothed," signifies general and primary truths; "the ring on the hand" signifies the conjunction of truth and good in the internal or spiritual man; "the shoes on the feet" signify the same in the external or natural man, and both signify regeneration; "the fatted calf" signifies the good of love and charity; and "to eat and be glad" signifies consociation and heavenly joy.