

The Rescuing Love of the Father

Reading: Luke 15:1-2, 11-24

This story brings us to the very heart of God & the heart of the gospel - the message of the Bible. In the story there are three main characters; the younger son, the forgiving father & the elder brother. All the valuable lessons of the parable are learnt from the attitudes & actions of these three characters. This story is Jesus' big right hook in the face of pharisaic assumptions & a life-line to tax collectors & sinners. As we go through the story let's keep in our minds that the younger son portrays the tax collectors & sinners while the older son portrays the Pharisees & Scribes. **VERSES 11-16...**

The younger son asks his father for his share of the property which would have been a third of everything. The older son being the eldest was entitled to two thirds. His request was sinister because it really meant he could not wait for his father to die. In those days a man did not have to wait until he died to hand down his property legacy. It was not uncommon for a father to grant his son legal right to his inheritance while still alive. However, the income from that property still belonged to him. Although his son now had legal right to the assets, he did not have the right to sell them.

What the prodigal son actually did then, was demand that his father hand over his assets now. It was not just the property he wanted, but the right to sell his inheritance. For a son to make such a demand was utterly unthinkable; it was the height of greed & disrespect! Like the tax collectors listening, this young man was greedy for money. When he said **"Give me the share of the property that is coming to me"** he was saying, in effect, **"I can't wait for you to die!"** The father's wealth was more important to him than the father's presence. This becomes clear when verse 13 says; **"Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country."** The Greek expression for **"gathered all he had"** comes from the world of finance. It means to take ones property & turn it into cash.

This younger son was lost before he even left home. He was lost in selfishness, ingratitude, rebellion & greed. He was lost in his rejection of authority. But primarily he was lost in his lack of love for the father. He was prepared to break off relationship with his father & family in order to go after what his selfish heart desired. In reality the prodigal son is a picture of us in our rebellion. Like him we desire to run away from God & his family & live the way we want. This is what sin is: running from God. What the younger son really wanted was the freedom to sin, and in order to have that freedom he had to get away from his father, away from his family, away from his faith & away from his community.

Surprisingly the father granted him his request, & within a matter of days the prodigal turned all his assets into cash. This would have left him with a lot of money. We know from the end of the story that his father was a wealthy man, with herds of livestock, hired servants & a banqueting hall he could afford to fill with

music & entertainment. Now his younger son had a big chunk of all that in his wallet, & he was off to see the world.

His father's legacy was meant to set him up for life, but instead Jesus tells us he quickly squandered it all in reckless living. And when he had spent it all a famine arose in the country where he was, & he began to be in need. In desperation he hired himself out as a slave & ended up feeding pigs. This son, intent on living life away from his father, ended up serving pigs! In fact he got so desperate & hungry he actually began to envy the pigs he was feeding (v16). When you find yourself envying pigs you know you're in a bad place... To Jesus audience this was all absolutely repulsive. To the Jew a pig is an unclean animal. So to the listening crowd this was as low & degrading as any person could go. This younger son was the ultimate picture of rebellion, selfishness, waste, disrespect & disgust. But what comes next would have shocked those listening to Jesus to the core... **VERSES 17-24...**

This lost son was left with absolutely nothing. He did not even have the essentials for living, he was dying of starvation. He had hit rock bottom. **Then he had the thought that saved his life.** It was when he found himself in this desperate condition that he came to his senses & thought; ***"How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger."*** Then he got a speech prepared in the hope his father might make him a slave. Henri Nouwen writes: *"He was truly lost, and it was this complete lostness that brought him to his senses. He was shocked into the awareness of his utter alienation & suddenly understood that he has embarked on the road to death... He knew that one more step in the direction he was going would take him to self-destruction."*

This was the beginning of repentance as his heart turned towards home for hope. However it must be noted that his repentance was far from pure. His main concern was survival not reconciliation with his father. He is still thinking of his father as a means for getting what he wants. There may be a clue about this in the wording of his rehearsed confession: ***"I have sinned against heaven & before you"*** (v18). There is only one other person in the Bible who made this same confession. It was Pharaoh, who made his confession only because he wanted Moses to get rid of all the locusts (Ex. 10:16). I'm sure this was intentional by Jesus.

The prodigal son was nearly as manipulative. He intended to go to his father and say; ***"Treat me as one of your hired servants"*** (v19). These are the words of someone trying to work the system to get what they want or need. He is still telling his father what to do, just like when he left home. He is also trying to solve his own problem by working off his debt. He knows his father's servants ***"have more than enough bread"*** (v17). If he works long enough & hard enough, maybe he can pay off his own debts. So he headed home in hope of becoming a *slave* on his father's land. His repentance was far from pure, but at least he headed in the right direction.

Perhaps as he looked at his father's house in the distance he wondered if it was worth going any further. Such a son wouldn't be welcome back in the community, never mind his own family. The people in his home town would certainly despise him, but they might do something even worse. They might cut him off from their community entirely. According to Kenneth Bailey who has written a whole book devoted to helping us find cultural keys to understanding this one chapter, the Jewish community had developed a cutting-off ceremony. Any Jewish boy who lost his inheritance among Gentiles faced the ceremony if he ever dared show his face again in his home village. The ceremony itself was simple. The villagers would fill a large earthenware pot with burned nuts & corn & break it in front the guilty individual. While doing this, they would shout, *"So-and-so is cut off from his people."* From that point on, the village would have nothing to do with the guilty individual.

If the lost son received this punishment, it would be no more than he deserved. By disgracing his family, he had earned the condemnation of his community. This would be the expected ending to such a parable. But here the most amazing twist in this parable of Jesus comes. The father did not wait for the villagers to reject his son. Instead, ***"while he was a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him"***. The people listening would never have expected to hear this. No father would ever accept such a son back into the family.

What is perhaps most surprising is the way the father ran. Even today it is rare to see an old man run; but this was especially true in the ancient Near East, where it was considered undignified for a man of age & position to run at all. The Greek word used here for ***"ran"*** was usually reserved for competitive races. But men who wore long robes, as the father would have, would never run in such a way. If an older man did want to run, he would have to gather up his robes like a child, with his undergarments most likely showing. In all likelihood the father had not run anywhere in decades. But here he is ignoring all the cultural rules, running towards his son who has wasted all that was given him & chosen the father's stuff over the father. And when he gets to him hugs him & kisses his filthy face over & over again – an expression of overflowing love!

Why did the old man run? Why did he make such a spectacle of himself? He did it because he could not wait to see his son, yes of course; but there was more to it. He ran to rescue him from being cut off from the community & therefore cut off from reconciliation with him. Here is how Kenneth Bailey explains it:

"The father waits day after day, staring down the crowded village street to the road in the distance along which his son disappeared with arrogance & high hopes. The father also remembers the cutting-off ceremony. He knows only too well how the village will treat his son when he returns in rags. Thus, the father prepares a plan for their meeting. His plan is to reach the boy before the boy reaches the village & thereby protect him from the wrath of the community. The father realises that if he is able to achieve reconciliation with his son, in public, no one in the village will treat the prodigal badly. If the community witnesses the reconciliation, there will be no suggestion from any quarter that the cutting-off ceremony should be enacted. But to achieve that goal, self-emptying humiliation will be required of the father."

God is much more gracious, much more forgiving than the community. God will forgive people for things their community would never forgive them for. This is the message coming through here.

When the father ran to meet his son, he was exposing himself to public humiliation. Rather than looking at the lost son & seeing what a mess he had made of his life, people would be looking instead at the elderly father racing down the street, bare legs & all. By the time anyone realised what was happening the son would already be accepted by the one person that really mattered. And if he was accepted by his father then no one else in the community had any right to reject him. In this way, as well as obviously pointing to the compassionate love of God the Father for sinners, this story also points us to the sacrifice of Jesus. When he took all our shame upon himself so we could be reconciled to God & received into his eternal kingdom. Just as the father in the story humbled himself & done all that needed be done so has Christ has done all that needed to be done to secure our welcome home to the kingdom of God!

Of course the father doesn't stop there & neither does our Father in Heaven. In response to the fathers love the son for the first time expresses repentance without demands (v21) & gets rewarded with more grace than he could have imagined. The father says 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 fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate."***

Again this seems quite illogical. I mean should the son not be the one bearing all the gifts. He is the one who owes the great debt, he's the one who has cost the family so much; however, he has nothing to give. Empty-handed, he returns, with nothing for anyone. Again this is a picture of us in our sins, coming before God with nothing but our need for grace. And it is a picture of God lavishing us with what we don't deserve & what we could never earn. In the eyes of the Father we are sons & daughters, not slaves or hired servants. 1 John 3:1 says; ***"See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are."*** But too often we live like religious slaves trying to earn God's approval... but he wants us to live as children receiving, enjoying & extending his grace...

Let's not miss the significance of the gifts the father lavished on his son, each of which signified sonship. When the father called for the best robe, he was placing his mantle on his son. As long as the boy continued to wear the ragged garments of servitude, people would think that he was still a slave. But when he put on the finest robe from his father's house, they would recognise his position as a son. Because we are clothed in the righteousness of Christ Heaven recognises us as sons & daughters of God. We need to view ourselves this way. The ring was even more significant. This was most likely a signet ring: whoever wore it controlled the estate. The ring then was an emblem of authority & the restoration of his inheritance... Even his shoes were a sign of sonship. Servants did not wear shoes in those days, sons did.

His last gift was the fattened calf which the family had been saving for a special occasion. With the celebration of this rare feast, the lost son was welcomed back into table fellowship. Here is a picture of God receiving an outrageous sinner & eating with him; just as the Pharisees & scribes had accused Jesus of doing in verse two. But Jesus' story goes much further than the accusations of the 'religious elite'. Jesus story paints a picture of God lavishing undeserved & unearned gifts on this most outrageous of sinners. The father gave him the best of everything, expecting nothing in return. How infuriating this story must have been to those Pharisees & scribes... Here the father almost rewards his lost son with the robe of honour, the ring of inheritance, the foot-ware of freedom & the feast of fellowship. He did all this because he wanted everyone to know his son was still his son & he was forgiven of all his sins.

In this parable we see the grace of God who loves us even more than we ever dared to hope, with a love which cannot be earned or manipulated or quenched by even the most outrageous acts of rebellion. With a love that waits for & welcomes us as children & lavishes us with everything we do not deserve. If we are going to Share Jesus effectively then we need to reflect this illogical, surprising, shocking, cultural rule-breaking grace which runs to the rescue of sinners! No one had more been offended more than the father in this story, yet it is the father who is running to his rescue with forgiveness & grace.

It is only this boundless love of God that can ignite true repentance in people's hearts! This is the love we have received & this is the love we are to love one another & all with without exception. Many people do not have this view of God, perhaps we don't even have this view of God; but we are called to revel in this love & reflect this in how we love one another & all.