

Luke 15:11-32
The Prodigal Son
or
How to Respond when Good Things Happen to Bad People

Part 2, The Father
Luke 15:20-24

Last time we spoke of a rebellious young man who demanded his inheritance before it was due and then squandered it on an indulgent lifestyle. Finding himself in a foreign land, friendless, and without hope he lowered himself to taking care of the pigs of a Gentile he had come to know. Eventually his reason returned, and he acknowledged his sin. He mustered up enough courage to go home and face his father in the hopes not of rejoining the family, for that was out of the question, but of merely being hired as a day laborer in his father's employ.

Today we will speak of the father. He was a heartbroken man who had been defied by a son he had loved. Humiliated in the village, he was the gossip of his neighbors who spoke of how his indulgence had been repaid with greed and selfishness. His son had dishonored him with his request, and the father had increased that dishonor by acquiescing to it. The father had given his son what he demanded, the boy had fled the area, and only rumors were heard about where he might be or what he might be doing. No doubt the locals shook their heads and agreed that God had justly visited His divine punishment on the man. The Pharisees had nodded in agreement when Jesus told them that the wasteful habits of the young man and the indulgence of the father had been adequately repaid by the son's downfall and the father's humiliation.

Now that the boy was returning home, the audience to which Jesus was speaking listened closely to hear of the wrath of the father poured out of the fallen son. Here was a chance for the father to regain some honor and standing within the community. They understood that the foolish youth must humble himself, repent of his past sins and accept a place among the slaves and servant of his father's household. Then perhaps, after years of proving his sorrow, he might be restored to some place within the family. The father's dignified, cold response was key to demonstrating that he, too, had learned a lesson from this awful experience.

Jesus, however, again subverted the expectations of His listeners, for this is a story that would shock the legalistic Pharisees who believed the only possible outcome for the rebellious youth was to try to earn his father's favor. Jesus told the story of a father who proved to be as prodigal as his son.

Unexpected Reception

The father had never abandoned hope. He saw his son coming "while he was still a long way off" (v. 20). The appropriate response was clear. It was dictated by the custom of the times and the culture of the Jews. The boy had sinned. The boy had rebelled against his father. He was considered dead. Perhaps even a funeral service had been held. Honor required that the father not receive the boy, but rather make him wait. Perhaps he should even be required to wait outside the village gates so all could see and mock him. It all depended on the will of the father. How badly did the father want the boy to suffer?

Only when the entire village had mocked him, only when he had been spat upon and kicked and thoroughly shamed, only when his disgrace had been made complete, then the father might coldly receive him and listen to the son's pleas for forgiveness. The son would bow with his face to the ground and kiss his father's feet. The father would be unemotional, cold and distant. This was the only way for him to restore the honor he had lost in the village. After such ritual humiliation, the father might condescend to allow the boy to become a servant, or he might simply turn his back and walk away leaving the young man nowhere to go. Nothing more could be expected. This is what honor required.

If this seems harsh, there was a precedent. Remember Joseph. When he faced his brothers, who had sold him into slavery in Egypt, he did not at first reveal himself and forgive them. He kept his emotions inside and sought to prove the value of his brothers, “⁶now Joseph was the ruler over the land; he was the one who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brothers came and bowed down to him with their faces to the ground. ⁷When Joseph saw his brothers he recognized them, but he disguised himself to them and spoke to them harshly” (Genesis 42:6-7). He made them prove themselves before he offered forgiveness.

At least that's the way the story ought to go according to the self-righteous Pharisees who were listening. That was what made sense to them. In fact, the legal punishment for such behavior was much more demanding.

“¹⁸If any man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father or his mother, and when they chastise him, he will not even listen to them, ¹⁹then his father and mother shall seize him, and bring him out to the elders of his city at the gateway of his hometown. ²⁰They shall say to the elders of his city, ‘this son of ours is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey us, he is a glutton and a drunkard.’ ²¹Then all the men of his city shall stone him to death; so you shall remove the evil from your midst, and all Israel will hear of it and fear” (Deuteronomy 21:18-21).

To the Pharisees, the father was being lenient by not requiring his son be put to death.

But that is not the story the way Jesus told it. As Jesus related the story, upon seeing his son, the father “felt compassion for him” (v. 20). His first response was not anger, but sorrow. He sympathized. He pitied his son. Even from a distance he could tell that his son was not returning as he had left. When the boy departed, he had done so in the splendor of wealth and finery. Now, the father saw his son in rags, ill-fed, ill-clothed, and staggering under the weight of his humiliation. Even from a distance the father could see that his boy was in trouble.

The father must have been constantly on the watch for signs of his son's return. How many hours had he spent on the rooftop or in a tower in one of his fields? How many times had he commanded his slaves to watch carefully lest any sign of the boy's return appear? The boy had been gone a long time. Scripture does not give specifics, but we can assume at least several weeks or a few months. The father had never given up hope. Like his son he, too, had rehearsed what he would say and do if and when his son returned. He had planned it all carefully in the lonely hours watching and waiting.

Since he could see him at a distance, it must have been daylight. The village was awake and people were going about their daily routines. The place was active, and the father knew exactly what he had to do, “he ran” (v. 20). He had to get to his son before the villagers saw him. No doubt his son would be recognized, even in his current state, and people would begin to gather and mock and cast judgment. His father wanted to spare him that. It is moving to see that the first inclination of the offended father was to spare his son any further pain. Rather than allow his son to receive the looks and words that he deserved from those who had watched his folly, the father sought to spare him that. No longer a young man, the father’s emotions overcame both his physical nature and his dignity, and he ran.

The word run means, literally, a sprint. He did not jog or trot. He did not briskly walk or hurry. He did not send a servant. He sprinted as fast as his sandals allowed. Hauling his outer garment up between his legs, he went as fast as he could without tripping or falling. He exposed his legs, something absolutely not done by a dignified man or woman. It was a startling sight. He was embarrassing himself to save his wayward son embarrassment.

This is a point worth considering at some length. In the culture of the time (and today as a matter of fact) respectable, honorable men do not run. It demonstrated a lack of dignity. Boys ran. Servants ran. But men did not run. So ingrained is this notion, that early translations of this passage in Arabic usually stated “he presented himself” or “he hurried” and it was not until in mid-nineteenth century that the father appears to be running in any Arabic version of the Bible. So what might appear to us in our culture as an emotional moment (if it were a movie we would hear the musical crescendo) to the listeners of Jesus’ day, this was scandalous.

When he reached his son, he “embraced him and kissed him” (v. 20). Filthy as he was, smelling as he did, nevertheless the father buried his face in the young man’s neck and kissed him. The wording means that he kissed him over and over again. He was unabashed, He must have been sobbing. The son must have been shocked. The father forgave before forgiveness was requested. This was not what the young man had expected. The Pharisees listening to Jesus must have groaned in disapproval. But Jesus was not merely telling a story, He was making a point.

The Pharisees built their understanding of God on fear. To them, God was holy and just and unwilling to leave any sin unpunished. That meant that all had fallen short and that only by perfectly keeping the Law could anyone possibly merit forgiveness. Jesus also taught of a God who was holy and just and unwilling to leave any sin unpunished. But recognizing the inability of fallen man to possibly earn salvation, Jesus spoke of a God who offered grace.

The father in the story is clearly a Christ-figure. He offered His love unconditionally. Remember that the father’s actions occurred even before his son has spoken a word of repentance. So, too, “God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). The father offered his love sacrificially. So, too, did Christ “⁶who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. ⁸Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:6-8). And, the

father incurred great shame to do so. So, too, did “Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame” (Hebrews 12:2).

The young man tried to make his rehearsed speech, “father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son” (v.21). He did not make excuses. He did not try to come up with mitigating circumstances. Broken in spirit the boy simply confessed. But his father would have none of that. The young man began but could not finish. The father had responded so generously that the son never finished his apology. He never got to the part where he offered to become a hired servant. The boy had incurred a debt he could never repay. The money was gone; he could never replace it. He could never undo the shame and heartache he had caused. He had intended to offer to be taken as one of the hired men, but he never got the chance to ask, so generous was the father’s forgiveness.

Complete Reconciliation

The Pharisees had to be squirming in their seats. After all, what was the Law for if not to atone for sin. How could someone be forgiven so easily? What was the purpose of all the sacrifices and rituals? This was an affront to everything the Pharisees believed in. But the Pharisees had got it wrong. The purpose of the Law was to show that no one could atone of their own sin. That was why there had to be sacrifices. Beginning with Abraham it was understood by the righteous that “God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering” (Genesis 22:8). This theme was reinforced at the first Passover. Blood was indeed required for the forgiveness of sins, but it was not the blood of the sinner that was needed. That would never be sufficient. For the forgiveness of sins, the blood of a Savior was needed.

But Jesus was not finished with the story. Recall that the entire village had seen the young man’s sin against the father. All knew the story. The father had needed to find somebody to buy the land, and village elders no doubt witnessed the transaction. The young boy had sold off the possessions he had inherited. Buyers were found in the community to take the goods off his hands at a reduced price so he could quickly be on his way. The sin was public, and the father insisted that his forgiveness be equally public.

The father began commanding his servants. These servants had evidently run after the man concerned for his safety, and perhaps his sanity. Out of breath, the father gave short, direct orders, “quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet” (v. 22). Now it was the father’s turn to be prodigal, to be extravagant. Each of these objects held special significance. The father knew that. He wanted everyone in the village (and many were no doubt beginning to gather around at this point) to see that his son had been fully restored to the full rights and privileges of sonship.

Sandals were not usually worn by slaves. This boy would not be a hired servant. He was a son of the family, and as such, he wore sandals. Everyone would see the significance of this symbolic act. The father was clearly stating that he was accepting his son back as his son, not as a servant. He would not be a second-class citizen in this family.

Again notice that this is done without any conditions. It is done without hesitation or some “waiting period” to see if the boy will make good on his repentance. The father has no thoughts of a temporary settlement until things sort themselves out. There is no need to talk with the elder brother. Here is no

need to bring the elders of the village or the leaders of the synagogue into the discussion. The son has returned and he is welcomed back as a son.

The ring was probably a signet ring. It was worn by the father on important occasions and used to identify the wearer. For example, Pharaoh owned such a ring, “Pharaoh took off his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph’s hand, and clothed him in garments of fine linen and put the gold necklace around his neck” (Genesis 41:42) This ring was a symbol of authority. More than signifying a return to the family, it informed those watching of the son’s place in that family. The father was assuring those around that his son was restored to his original position within the family. All the rights and privileges of sonship were his, without abridgement.

The legal power that such an emblem conveyed is called usufruct. Roman law recognized that it was possible for someone to share in the fruits (that is the literal meaning) for something without owning it. The father was making it clear that his son had full use of the lands, property, and all else that the father owned without exception. The father still owned them, but the son could have complete use of it all. The elder son would, of course, inherit all the father’s possessions, but until the father died, the younger son had full rights.

The robe was a symbol of status. It was worn only on very special occasions, such as the wedding of the elder son or the visit of an important person, for example. It was valuable and irreplaceable. The father rushed to put it on his son even before the young man has had a chance to clean up and bathe. He smelled of pig. He had traveled miles in his clothes. Who knows when he last touched water. Sweat, dirt, and animal debris are all over him. Still the father had brought the most expensive and beautiful piece of clothing the family owned and had it put on his son.

That these would be given to the rebellious younger son would have astonished the Pharisees. That they were given without any conditions or limitations would be unimaginable.

Unbridled Rejoicing

But still Jesus was not finished with either the story or the point He was making. Having showered his son with clear signs of restoration, the father turned to his servants and said “bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate” (v. 23). That the man had such an animal was another indication of the wealth of the family. They had a special animal, reserved to be killed and eaten for a special occasion.

In the first century, meat was a luxury, and beef even more so. Fish and chickens provided most of the protein in the diet. This particular calf was grain fed. That is, he was kept in a pen and not allowed to wander and graze. This assured that the calf was fat, rather than lean, and perfect for feasting. The calf would have been bred specifically for some celebration, such as a wedding. He would have been about five or six months old. Even with today’s modern cattle industry, veal is very expensive.

Again, this was something that should have been reserved of the first born son; perhaps to use at the feast of his wedding. Such an animal would feed a few hundred people, so the entire village must have been invited to the celebration. It would have been the biggest feast the family had offered, and perhaps the most extravagant the village had seen in years. And this was only the beginning, for Jesus said “ they began to celebrate” (v. 24). This indicates a celebration that would last for days. There was no doubt to

either the villagers in the story, or the Pharisees listening to it, that the rebellious prodigal son had been completely restored.

What could prompt such a response from the father? He gave us the answer himself, “this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found” (v. 24). The son who had determined to go down a road that led only to destruction had been restored. The possibility for a fruitful, productive, God-honoring life was seen again.

Takeaways

There is, perhaps, no more clear illustration of God’s generous, undeserved, and unconditional love in any of Jesus’ parables. May we rejoice in our Father who is prodigal with His grace to us and restores us from death to life.