

The Parables of Jesus  
iv. A Father and Two Sons  
Luke 15:11-31

Everyone loves a story and Jesus is a master storyteller. Indeed, the parable of the Prodigal Son is perhaps the greatest story ever told, without parallel in its dramatic effect. Its vivid storyline and riveting intrigue make it hard to forget as the listener is disarmed and persuaded, caught unawares as the habits of one's heart are exposed and challenged.

Jesus captured the imagination in an oral culture where many of his listeners could not read and had to rely on memorization in order to learn, hence the brief storyline: home, sick of home, homesick, home! with dramatic twists and turns in-between.

When the younger son asked for his inheritance, in effect, he was wishing his father dead as an estate was only wound up then. Moreover, the father complies, unheard of in Jesus' day. And so the dramatic effect is heightened. The son heads off and his path spirals ever downward. A Jewish lad ends up destitute herding Gentile pigs. The pathetic irony would not have escaped the ears of Jesus' listeners. Moreover, his present plight is in stark contrast to the messages of memory recalling his former life under his father's roof.

"He comes to his senses"; the hinge that opens the door to repentance and the journey home. But even then, he hatches a plan to retain some semblance of pride and dignity by working his way back into the father's favour as a servant, thereby restoring squandered privilege. However, the waiting father would have none of it. He runs to embrace his wayward son before a shame-based community could lay a hand on him. The son's attempt to tell of his plan is drowned by grace, generosity and celebration. "For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." The story of humanity writ large in so few words!

The response of the elder brother is cataclysmic. Years of seething anger and resentful compliance explode with dramatic effect. He abuses his father and castigates his brother. Not content to humiliate his father, he exaggerates the failings of his brother. He remains defiant outside the family home; ignoring the father's invitation "My son you are always with me and everything I have is yours".

The pathos of the parable lies in its open-ended conclusion. We are not told whether the elder brother is reconciled to the father. We are left with the invitation and opportunity to write our own conclusion. Whether the younger brother having plumbed the depths of prodigal wastefulness, or the elder brother's outward compliance hiding inner rebellion, the prodigal extravagance of the father heart of God stands ready to embrace and restore. After all he is the central character in the story.

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