

## NEW TRUTH FROM AN OLD STORY 8

### "The Prodigal Son"

Luke 15: 11-32

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<sup>13</sup>"A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and took a trip to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money on wild living. <sup>14</sup>About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. <sup>15</sup>He persuaded a local farmer to hire him to feed his pigs. <sup>16</sup>The boy became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything.

<sup>17</sup>"When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, 'At home even the hired men have food enough to spare, and here I am, dying of hunger! <sup>18</sup>I will go home to my father and say, "Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, <sup>19</sup>and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired man."'

<sup>20</sup>"So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long distance away, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. <sup>21</sup>His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.'

<sup>22</sup>"But his father said to the servants, 'Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger, and sandals for his feet. <sup>23</sup>And kill the calf we have been fattening in the pen. We must celebrate with a feast, <sup>24</sup>for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.' So the party began.

<sup>25</sup>"Meanwhile, the older son was in the fields working. When he returned home, he heard music and dancing in the house, <sup>26</sup>and he asked one of the servants what was going on. <sup>27</sup>'Your brother is back,' he was told, 'and your father has killed the calf we were fattening and has prepared a great feast. We are celebrating because of his safe return.'

<sup>28</sup>"The older brother was angry and wouldn't go in. His father came out and begged him, <sup>29</sup>but he replied, 'All these years I've worked hard for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. <sup>30</sup>Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the finest calf we have.'

<sup>31</sup>"His father said to him, 'Look, dear son, you and I are very close, and everything I have is yours. <sup>32</sup>We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!'

My family has never been much into genealogies like some others. Is yours? But about 8 years ago, a cousin of mine decided to host a huge family reunion at her home in Mitchell. Up to 70 people have attended those food fests! We Culver's are all about food you know. The second or third year of this reunion, a great aunt (who is into genealogies) suggested we build a huge family tree on the side of the house, and we'd each add family names, dates of birth and death etc.

It was quite a site, and conversation piece, this huge paper tree covering almost one whole side of the house. Near the trunk, I was introduced for the first time, to my great grandfather, who had been virtually ignored in conversations amongst and about my family. Apparently this grandfather had had an extra-marital affair, which in those days was called 'adultery' and was not near as common nor easily accepted as it is today; and he was literally ignored and almost removed from our sacred family tree.

Today's text introduces us to a family tree of sorts, though it involves only three people. Obviously there was a mother involved at some time, but remains unnamed in this particular story. Let me also remind you of our context before we begin in earnest. Jesus is teaching among a group of Pharisees and religious leaders, and he's using stories of lost things to demonstrate his vivid point. The lost sheep, and the lost coin precede this story of the lost or Prodigal Son.

As mentioned there are 3 characters that we should consider in greater detail today. Number one:

### **1. THE PRODIGAL YOUNGER SON**

This younger son, like so many of us, seeks fame and fortune outside Bismarck. He requests of his father, his portion of the inheritance he would receive upon his father's death, and sets out to a distant land, let's call it Deadwood.

This whole conversation reveals much about this famous son for whom the parable is misnamed. He is not the hero of the story, but bears it's name. His request was tantamount to declaring to his dad; "You are as good as dead to me, old man, I want my share, NOW, to do with as I please." His selfishness is paramount, for demanding his inheritance is far more grievous than simply leaving the family farm operation to pursue his personal passions.

His share would have been 1/3 of the father's property, wealth, and possessions. The eldest Jewish son, by law, received 2/3, largely because he was responsible for maintaining the family business, and any elderly parents until their death.

It took some doing to convert the estate into cash, but the boy convinces his dad to do so, and off he goes to a distant land, let's call it Las Vegas. There he squanders his money till he ends up destitute, penniless, and friendless. He is feeding pigs, a great job for a kosher Jew; until he comes to his senses, and begins to plot his return.

We often think of this 'coming to his senses' as his repentance, but that might be a bit overstated and simplified. It might simply have been a light bulb going on in his head, or rather his growling stomach. Anyway, he plans a good speech, self-serving as it might be, and heads for home. Interestingly enough, once the reunion takes place, and the party begins, he is not heard from again in the Bible!

It's easy to identify with this guy, for most of us, if we'd be honest, have left home at some point to sow our own version of wild oats. Many of us have had some familiar 'coming to our senses' event that shocked us back to reality. Most of us are familiar with this guy's spirit of selfishness, and some of us are lucky enough to have had fathers and families that welcomed us home from our wayward journey's.

Truth be told, all of us are prodigal sons and daughters, oh, maybe not from earthly families, but all of us have wandered into our own wastelands, let's call it...sin; till we come to our spiritual senses and come home to a loving Heavenly Father. Yea, it's easy to understand this young fellow, for we are he!

## **2. THE PRODIGAL LOVING FATHER**

That's not a typo or an attempt to throw off your premature outline guessing. I will make my point if you can let me.

It's hard to think about this father any way but how he has been interpreted throughout history, as the loving Heavenly Father, patiently throwing open the curtains morning after morning so he might gaze longingly down the tree lined lane to see if this might be the day his lost son comes limping humbly home. That is the portrait painted firmly in my mind, and it is not wrong, but I have some questions about this father.

Why in the world would he give this rebellious son what he knew was wrong or bad for him? Why would he not refuse this request, and force the kid to work alongside brother # 1? What loving and knowledgeable parent would enable his/her kid by giving in to their selfish wishes? Seeing this father as a picture of a perfect God makes it hard to figure out what Jesus was really trying to say. God **is** extravagant in His dispersal of blessing on our lives, even when He knows we'll waste them, or undervalue them, or even use them for evil purposes. God **is** extravagant in patience, waiting for us to come to our senses and come home. But this earthly dad in Jesus' story is suspect.

Why doesn't he let this wayward son finish his confession speech? He cuts him off and leaves the most telling part unsaid. This father had 3 levels of servants, the bondservants, who were more like family members than servants, the servants who assisted the bondservants, and were like distant cousins to the family, and the hired hands, who were daily workers who had no rights, no promise of work, just the assurance of food. The son's rehearsed but undelivered speech was to beg for a spot on the hired hand crew, but his dad cuts off his speech with talk of a robe, a ring and some slippers. When the younger son hears this, all bets are off, he'll gladly wear the robe of belonging, and the ring that represents authority, and the shoes that distinguished the owner's children from the slave children who went barefoot. Thus the negro spiritual: "All God's Children got shoes," was composed from this simple line.

And furthermore I want to know how can he fail to invite/include the elder son in the party? It's understandable that the younger brother ignores or disses his older stern brother, but does the father's unbridled joy disable his ability to at least include the elder faithful brother?

Again, it's right to think of this father as a picture of a loving God, and it would be more appropriate to name this parable for it's obvious hero, the Loving father, but I still have my questions. Let's move on.

### **3. THE PRODIGAL ELDER SON**

Again, no attempts to deceive; just bear with me. Prodigal doesn't mean you have to leave home to sow wild oats, some of the kids who stay home all their lives are just as prodigal, just not so far away.

This elder brother is an interesting character, and frankly, the point of Jesus' story. Remember to whom he is talking? This elder brother is absent in the early verses, and I, of course, wonder why? Why didn't he step in to convince his younger brother of his stupid schemes? Why doesn't he do his job and keep the family intact? And why does he apparently and willingly accept his father's decision to divide the aforementioned inheritance? If he was really the good son, wouldn't he have refused his father's request, instead giving honor and gratitude saying something like: 'Father, you keep the property, for you are still head of the household as long as you live; and may you live for decades.'

Now, lets again be honest, we can identify with this guy. We'd be miffed too if our brother was home, and a party was held, and no one had the decency to even call us from the field. I spent many a day cultivating corn while my stomach growled, as I became more and more convinced that someone had forgotten to come with the pickup to fetch me home for lunch! I can understand how he felt, can you?

When he did arrive home to the noise of music, and sight of dancing, all of which happened after the meal had been eaten, he's ticked. He refuses the servants pleading to come in, and so dad is sent to beg and insist. Here's where it gets interesting. He makes a couple statements that give me pause. He says, "All these years I've been home, I've never disobeyed one of your commands." "Oh yeah, what about my request that you come into the banquet." You see, whereas, the younger brother was filled with selfishness, the elder brother seems equally filled with self-righteousness. No one is that perfect to obey every command.

Next he tries another one on good old dad. "All these years I've broken my back in your fields, and never once have you given me even a measly goat for a party with my friends." What? Whose fields was he working in? Whose goat was in the corral with whose fatted calf? The father had given him 2/3 of everything he owned. His dad no longer owned anything; the elder son owned it all! His 'self-righteousness' had blinded him to what he had, and living that lie revealed his underlying jealousy, envy, and even contempt for this wayward brother who went off and enjoyed life, while he stayed home, lived the 'perfect', respectable, even religious life, but never enjoyed any of it!

So it was with many of the religious people of Jesus' day. They were scrupulous in following the details of their religion, but they weren't enjoying it. They were working hard at the business of religion, but without fulfillment or joy. Then when they saw rank sinners coming to Jesus and enjoying the faith and friendship they found in him, they were bewildered. In fact, they resented it. They had lived in the house of religion all their lives, but had never experienced the joy of being there. Do you know anyone like that?

Why does Jesus tell such a story? Why would he include so many stories with so many mixed up characters? Why would he point out character flaws in each of his characters?

The younger son's selfishness, the father's ignoring of the older son, the older son's pride and self-righteousness. Partly because he wants us to see our own families in this imperfect family. If he'd have painted a perfect family portrait how many of us could identify? If even one of the family members was perfect, most of our families would be left out, we all have dysfunctional families, just different levels of dysfunction.

That's why this story is so important. Not only can we see ourselves as one or maybe more of the characters, we can see our family in this story, and see hope for even our family in this story. On your canvas, paint the ending you want for the parable, but on the canvas of your own family, paint it realistically, with all the oddities, quirky family members, in-laws and outlaws, prodigal sons and prodigal fathers and even prodigal mothers. They are all there.

Remember Jesus' genealogy listed in Matthew? In that long and illustrious list of Biblical giants and faith hero's, there appear the names of 5 women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary the mother of Jesus. What do we know about these women? Well, Ruth and Mary are quite circumspect at first glance, but Tamar played the harlot (prostitute) Rahab was a prostitute and Bathsheba was either a victim or participant in adultery and the murder of her husband. Three out of 5 women in Jesus' family tree are rotten apples! But they are in the genealogy, in the book of Matthew, which is in the Bible. There is hope for your family, and mine! There is hope for you and me! God loves us, prostitutes and prodigals alike. Aren't you glad?

In year 6 of our family reunion in Mitchell, two elderly sisters showed up. I'd never seen them before, I wasn't sure who invited them, but as the now famous family tree was unveiled again, they placed their names, with a crooked but connected line, to my great grandfather, the daughters of his young mistress...a couple more great aunts... and of course, we ate together... Let us pray

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