**The prodigal son**

Over the past weeks we have looked at the actions of Jesus as our intercessor and redeemer, as well as facing the fact that we can get trapped in sinful behaviour which dishonours God and dishonours ourselves.

Today I want to give hope that such sinful actions can be redeemed by a God who loves us.

We can return to God, even if we have blotted our copy books so badly that we think we are irredeemable.

I want you to know that God does not begrudgingly receive us back into the fold but actively pursues us.

There is a famous poem by Francis Thompson entitled “The Hound of Heaven”

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;

I fled Him, down the arches of the years;

I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways

Of my own mind; and in the midst of tears

I hid from Him, and under running laughter.

Up vistaed hopes I sped;

And shot, precipitated,

Adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears,

From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.

I want to speak today of the God who pursues us with his love.

I want to examine a parable by Jesus, the well-known parable about the prodigal son.

I think the parable is mis-named. The title should recognise that the hero of this parable is not the son, but the Father.

The word prodigal is seldom used so let me explain what it means. The dictionary describes the word prodigal as spending money or using resources freely and recklessly; wastefully extravagant:

So let’s read the parable: Luke 15:11-31

*11 Then Jesus said, ‘There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger of them said to his father, “Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.” So, he divided his property between them.*

First of all, this is disgusting behaviour from the son. It was tantamount to wishing his father dead. Give me my inheritance now rather than when you die, he was saying. And the father because he loved his son, acquiesced.

13 *A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living.*

He deliberately went away from His family, his traditions, his morals and his upbringing. He turned his back on his past and was attracted like a moth to the flame by the bright lights of the world.

James Weldon Johnson in one of his verses in his poem The Prodigal Son wrote:

Young man—

Young man—

Smooth and easy is the road

That leads to hell and destruction.

Down grade all the way,

The further you travel, the faster you go.

No need to trudge and sweat and toil,

Just slip and slide and slip and slide

Till you bang up against hell’s iron gate.

I think of my own story. When I left home at 17, I took nothing of my family’s religious lifestyle and drank deeply of the world’s offerings, making poor choices.

*14 When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs.*

This is the basest, lowest dept he could have fallen. Pigs were unclean animals under Jewish law. According to a historian of the time, no person was lower in the sight of a Jew than a swine herd, they were not permitted to mingle with polite society, or to worship in the temple, nor marry decent folk.[[1]](#footnote-1) He had sunk so low. From the son of a rich landowner, to becoming a swineherd, abandoned by his free spending mates.

*16 He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. 17 But when he came to himself, he said, “How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! 18 I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’”*

The phrase “Came to himself” is a striking expression, likening the state of rebellion against God to being a kind of madness. It represents the beginning of repentance as the return of a sound consciousness.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Notice that Jesus doesn’t say, ‘when he came to the end of his resources,’ or ‘when he came to the city limits,’ but ‘‘When he came to his senses.’

R C Sproul comments that Jesus was aware that there are people who are lost, not only in terms of the kingdom of God, but in personal terms: they don’t even know themselves. A person can get so caught up in a kind of activity that he doesn’t even know who he is any more.

One of the greatest abilities we have as humans is the ability to deceive ourselves, to rationalize, to make up excuses. Some of us continue to delude ourselves, postponing that painful moment of honest self-evaluation. But this young man woke up to the reality of what he was doing. That awakening is, of course, the most critical point in his life.[[3]](#footnote-3)

My “coming to my senses” moment was when I was 35. I came to my senses and sought out God, I sought the faith of my parents and grandparents.

*20 So he set off and went to his father.*

Though “no more worthy to be called his son,” the prodigal sinner returns home willing to take the lowest place and do the meanest work.

Once it was, “Any place rather than home.” Now, “Oh, that home! Could I but dare to hope that the door of it would not be closed against me, how gladly would I take any place and do any work, happy only to be there at all.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

In moral terms, the son had done a dishonourable thing. The villagers on seeing this unkempt man making is way through the village to his father’s house, would have poured scorn on him, increasing his shame. They may even have spat on him and hit him.[[5]](#footnote-5)

But that was not the father’s response.

*But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.*

The father knowing how the villagers were going to act toward his son, ran out to his son before he came to the village, and the son entered the village under the protection of his father’s love.[[6]](#footnote-6)

God’s love does not depend on our repentance or our inner or outer changes.[[7]](#footnote-7) It is by amazing grace that the son was accepted by his father. In essence, he was saying “My son does not deserve this love that I give, but I forgive him.”

The father didn’t sit down and plan what he would say to his son, he didn’t rehearse a rebuke or practise an air of casual detachment. No, as soon as he saw his son, he felt compassion for him and ran and embraced him.

We may not realise the cultural significance of the father running to meet his son. In the ancient world a man of his social stature would wear great robes and be careful to follow the customs and protocol of the time. So, to see such a man running down the dusty roads, with his robes girded at the waist, was unthinkable.

But he didn’t care who saw him, he just wanted to get to his son. And when he does, he falls upon his neck and kisses him. In the Orient, to kiss someone in this way is not merely a sign of affection, or recognition, but is also a sign of forgiveness.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The father ran to the son, a son still guilty of all he had done, and threw his arms around him and kissed him.

In the Welsh revival in 1904-5 there was a hymn written called “Here is love vast as the ocean” and part of it says this:

On the mount of crucifixion,

Fountains opened deep and wide,

Through the floodgates of God’s mercy,

Flowed the vast and gracious tide.

Grace and love, like mighty rivers

Poured incessant from above,

And God’s peace and perfect justice

Kissed a guilty world in love.

Charles Spurgeon preaching in this passage suggests that he kept kissing him repeatedly and commented that he believed that God looks at the sinner, and looks at him again, and keeps looking at him, all the while delighting in the very sight of him, when he is truly repentant and comes back to the father’s house.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Although God wants to heal us of all our inner darkness, we are still free to make our own choice to stay in the darkness or to step into the light of God’s love[[10]](#footnote-10), but the son resolved to step into his father’s love again.

*21 Then the son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”*

Since he already had received (and spent) his inheritance, “I am no longer worthy to be called your son” refers to more than just the son’s legal standing within the family. He regards his actions as being so reprehensible that he deserves to be cut off from his family in a relational sense.[[11]](#footnote-11)

*22 But the father said to his slaves, “Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 And get the fatted calf and kill it and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” And they began to celebrate.*

When this father calls for the best robe in the house, this was his way of saying “I am restoring my son to the original position as though he never left home.”

It is an echo back to Genesis. When Adam and Eve sinned and realised that they were naked and were ashamed, God killed an animal and clothed them in its skin. Their shame was covered.

The Father in this parable covered the shame of his son.

Jesus was telling his listeners that when we return to God, we are fully restored as though we have never sinned.

The son’s filthy rags were taken off and replaced. God does that for us: taking away everything that represents an old life. He replaces it all together with the best He has to offer which the best anywhere in the whole entire universe.

Isaiah 61:10 *I will rejoice greatly in the Lord, my soul will exult in my God; For He has clothed me with garments of salvation, He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness,*

Putting a ring on his finger is also significant. In ancient times was a mark of honour and dignity. A signet ring was a sign of authority; it was used as a seal in wax when documents were signed to show the authority of the writer.

Putting on shoes is also significant: captives had their shoes taken from them along with their dignity and when they were restored to freedom their shoes were returned to them.

I stop the Parable there. I am not going to speak of the elder brother’s responses. That is the subject of another sermon for another day.

The prodigal son, or lost son, abused grace. Grace is most often defined as unmerited or unearned favour. He had a loving father, a good home, provision, a future, and an inheritance, but he traded it all in for temporal pleasures, like a moth after a flame.

We can be like that, we can choose to walk away from God and turn our backs on him and become involved in ungodly things, placing other things higher than God, trusting the bright lights of the world rather than the faith of our parents and grandparents, but we find that they are fool’s gold – shiny but worthless, just bling.

I am the prodigal son every time I search for unconditional love where it cannot be found,[[12]](#footnote-12) when I search for fulfilment in things and relationships outside of God.

We have a God who is an all-giving and forgiving father who does not measure out his love to his children according to how well they behave.[[13]](#footnote-13) For that I am grateful.

When we repent, he remembers our sins no more.

Hebrews 8:12 *For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.*

Micah 7:19 *He will again have compassion upon us; he will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.*

When we return to ‘our senses’ and return to God, we realise that God has been looking for us while we were hiding from him.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Jesus tells 3 parables which are similar: the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son, Jesus reaches the same conclusion Luke 15:7 *there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous ones who do not need to repent.*

*Luke 15:10 there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”*

*Luke 15:32 But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”*

The difference between the first two parables (sheep and coin) and the last is this: The sheep and coin have no ability to repent and return. Only people have that ability.

We can choose to keep running from the hound of heaven, or we can repent and turn from our evil ways and turn our face back to God.

2 Chronicles 7:14  *if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin …*

Note the conditional offer: If you repent, if you seek my face, if you turn from your evil ways, then I will forgive you.

There is action required for us to be accepted back into the arms of God: Repent and turn from what you were doing.

Let me conclude by reading the last 3 verses of a poem by James Weldon Johnson that read from earlier:

Then the young man came to himself—

He came to himself and said:

In my father’s house are many mansions,

Ev’ry servant in his house has bread to eat,

Ev’ry servant in his house has a place to sleep;

I will arise and go to my father.

And his father saw him afar off,

And he ran up the road to meet him.

He put clean clothes upon his back,

And a golden chain around his neck,

He made a feast and killed the fatted calf,

And invited the neighbours in.

Oh-o-oh, sinner,

When you’re mingling with the crowd in Babylon—

Drinking the wine of Babylon—

Running with the women of Babylon—

You forget about God, and you laugh at Death.

Today you’ve got the strength of a bull in your neck

And the strength of a bear in your arms,

But some o’ these days, some o’ these days,

You’ll have a hand-to-hand struggle with bony Death,

And Death is bound to win.

Young man, come away from Babylon,

That hell-border city of Babylon.

Leave the dancing and gambling of Babylon,

The wine and whiskey of Babylon,

The hot-mouthed women of Babylon;

Fall down on your knees,

And say in your heart:

I will arise and go to my Father.

if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin …

Let’s pray

1. *Clarke’s Commentary* Vol 5 457 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Vincent, M. R. *studies in the New Testament* (Vol. 1, p. 387). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Sproul, R. C. *A Walk with God: An Exposition of Luke* (p. 305). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (Vol. 2, p. 115 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Mark Stibbe *The Father you’ve been waiting for* 60 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Stibbe 60 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Henri Nouwen *The Return of the Prodigal Son: a story of homecoming* 78 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Sproul 307 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Stibbe 101 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Nouwen 78 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Faithlife Study Bible* (Lk 15:19). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Nouwen 43 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Nouwen 105 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Nouwen 106 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)