

Prodigal Son
Rev Reg Weeks

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The ultra-**religious people** surrounding Jesus ...are **muttering** with their **noses** wrinkled...

‘This **rabbi...this teacher...this Jesus** welcomes sinners and **eats** with them...’

So naturally Jesus tells them a story

For you and I... sitting **here** in third millennium New **Zealand** ...it’s **tempting** to see the story the way we **always** have...through the lens of our own kiwi cultural assumptions ...**tempting** to draw the same familiar **conclusions**.

Isn’t **awful... how** the youngest son runs **off**...gets in with the wrong **crowd**...and ends up with nothing
And isn’t it **wonderful** how his father joyfully welcomes him home... when he’s **ready** to say sorry...

And isn’t it sad the **other** son... is **so**... caught **up** in resentment and **anger** that he cuts **himself** off... from all the joy and celebration.
Certainly that understanding of the story makes **sense** to us ...in **our** culture...but Jesus wasn’t a 21st century novelist ...he was a **first** century rabbi. And so we must **beware** of our cultural **conditioning**...

So what happens if we walk **around** the story...about this **father** and his two lost **sons**...And view it from the standpoint of a middle-eastern **crowd** of tax collectors and **sinners**...and ultra-**religious** Pharisees...

And we **can** do this...because the biblical scholars Ken Bailey lived and studied in the middle-**east** from Morocco to **India**...from Turkey to the **Sudan** ...**asking** the locals... how **they** understand the parable of the prodigal son.

He made some interesting **discoveries**... and what **really surprised** him... was how consistently and **passionately**... people responded to this story at a gut level ...**especially** to the **shocking** suggestion that a son would **dare** ask for his inheritance...while his father was still **alive**

In the middle-**east**...this isn’t seen as the impulsive act of an irresponsible **young man**...but as a malicious and **abusive** insult... to his **father**. Bailey could find no law... no **custom** ...among Jews or **Arabs** which entitles a **son** to a share of his father’s **estate while** the father is still **alive**

In fact, such a request would destroy the relationship. As though the son had shouted to his father’s face,
‘I can’t **wait** for you to **die**...’

No in **this** parable the son’s behaviour is **far** more serious than running off to Europe...with the money your parents saved for your college education...and ending up in the gutter. Arab’s and Jews listening **today** to this story react just as those in the first century

hearing the son’s contempt for the father they’re just **waiting** with baited **breath**...for the father to explode with **rage** ...certain of the **punishment** he will rain **down** on his youngest son [**pause**]

But what **actually** happens?

Utterly against cultural **expectations**... the father **doesn’t** retaliate...**but** instead

he **agrees** to his son's **request**...
completely... and without **conditions**...
Such a thing is **unheard** of in the middle-east.
Ken Bailey found it's almost **impossible**
for them to **imagine** a love like **this** Father's love...

This father... in **Jesus'** story...is flying in the face of
every cultural **norm**...**this** father is overturning
all social expectations... **This** father's love
is **utterly** different than any father **they've** experienced...

this father's love contains... the element of **grace**...
grace that grants the son his **freedom**...
even to reject his **father**. [pause]

And there's still **another** twist to the story
As well as expecting the father to strike **back**...
Bailey's listeners **insist**... it's the duty of the **older** son
to act as mediator...and as peacemaker...
to **heal** the **broken** relationship

Older son

But in **Jesus** parable...the older brother does nothing of the
kind...instead he **distances** himself from the whole drama ... and to
middle **eastern** ears...the **older** son remains **disgracefully**
silent...and does absolutely **nothing** to **protest** the insult to his
father...
or stop the disintegration of his **family**...

The behaviour of **both** boys... is **unheard** of in eastern
culture...effectively they're **destroying** what every father **dreams**
of...that his sons would live **peacefully** together after his
death...enjoying the abundance of their inheritance.

this Jewish **custom** of *yashabh yahadh*
is idealized in Psalm 133

How good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell together in unity! It
is like precious oil poured on the head,
running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard,

By taking his portion of the **estate**...and **leaving** the village ...the
younger brother has effectively turned his **back** on his father's
dreams of blessing and family unity...
and in his refusal to **act**...so has his older **brother**. [pause]

But of course the story doesn't **end** here...
the youngest son...in his **freedom**... carelessly descends
into his own self-created **hell**...[pause]

And when he's as **low** as he can **go****stripped**...of all
physical...**emotional** and spiritual **support**... starving and
penniless...the lost **son** decides to change **direction**...
and turn his life **around**...to head **home**...[pause]

When we listen **carefully**...we can hear in the prodigal son's words
the familiar Jewish **teaching** on **repentance**. you **must** turn...you
must repent...to **earn** God's forgiveness. **Everyone** listening to **Jesus**
story... would recognise the words the son says to himself as he
plans and **rehearses** the traditional speech of repentance ...

Younger son

'I'll just go **back** to my father and I'll say: Father, I've **sinned**...
against **heaven** and against **you**.
I'm no **longer** worthy to be called your son....
so just make me like one of your **hired** men.'

Life has defeated him...his own **judgment** has destroyed him...he's
lost **everything**...and now he's going **home** ...

And He knows his abusive and offensive **behaviour**... will have hurt... not only his **father** ...but also the **community** he turned his **back** on... Jesus **listeners** expect an angry **vengeful** mob... to descend on the young man the moment he steps **foot** in the village. [pause]

But you know the story...his father has been watching the horizon every day...and sees him **coming**...

Father

before anyone **else** can get to him...**before** his son can open his **mouth** in the ritual of **confession** ... the father **acts**... quickly and decisively And runs to meet him... as no dignified mid-eastern **patriarch**... **ever** ran...

In front of **everyone** in the community...the father throws his arms around him... and substitutes **kisses...** for **words**

And **suddenly** the young man's cultural and religious world **view...**is **shattered**...his **understanding** of how the **relationship** with his dad really **works...** is **changed forever** by his fathers' **costly** demonstration of love... before the boy can say **anything**.... **grace** is extended... And... the boy **accepts** that grace. [pause]

Jesus' meaning is **clear**...

this is love like **no** other ...**whatever** it **costs**...the father will pay...homecoming **will** be celebrated... everyone is invited...a banquet is set...the best **wine** will be **served**... And the father's most precious **calf** ...will be **sacrificed**...There is to be a great **feast** of reconciliation.

And the ultra-**religious** round him... **mutter**...

'This Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them...'

and if like the older **brother** we **refuse** to join the party...if we can't let go of our **anger**, or resentment and or un-**forgiveness**...**then** the father comes to shatter our understanding of his love as well...as he leaves his place of honour at the **banquet** table...as he leaves the other **guests** ...even the guest of **honour**...to come out to **find** us... and **plead** with us... to join the feast...

Make no mistake, Jesus wants everyone with ears to hear to recognise that the father's behaviour in this **story** is a promise...a **revelation**... of the grace of God.

Full picture

In this parable Jesus sends an amazing message of **love**...

Malcolm Gordon

When we look at the three stories of Luke 15 together we often focus on the 'one' that is missing. The walkabout sheep. The missing coin. The runaway son. But there is more going on here. In the background is the Hebraic idea of shalom, which is often translated 'peace' but brings with it all kinds of ideas of wholeness and things-in-their-right-place-ness.. Think about the necklace/ It's no good while a part of it is missing. You can't wear it. Each part is diminished by the lack of that one coin.

I wonder if you've ever sat around your kitchen table and someone hasn't been there. Someone who normally is. Maybe they've been away for the weekend and missed the family meal. Maybe they were away for good. Have you noticed what that gathering feels like, what

goes on in your mind when you look at the seat they used to fill.

Its hard to enjoy yourself completely when there's someone missing.

I think these stories are pointing to the truth that we are ALL diminished when someone is missing. We are relational creatures, woven into this life together – not existing merely alongside each other.

There is a part of me that isn't seen when you're not here to see it.

So these stories are also about a flock that is less than whole, a necklace that is missing something precious, a family circle that is incomplete. Therefore, salvation is not just about bringing the lost one home for its own benefit, but because something of all of us is found when they are brought back. That's why the whole community is invited to celebrate, because everyone then is a winner!

We see that the older brother *needs* the Prodigal to come home so he can be confronted with his own slavery, masquerading as son-ship, and see the Father's lavish welcome of his runaway brother. The older brother needs to receive the Prodigal home in order to be delivered from his own bigotry and prejudice, which have bricked him into a tiny, impoverished way of being. The older brother is poorer without his little brother.

Perhaps this is why there has been no celebrating in this family for so long. We find out from the older brother that, 'you never even gave me a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends.' Perhaps the Father was saying, how could *we* celebrate when *we* were not all here.

This life is not about any one of us, but about all of us. And I'm waiting here looking to the horizon as long as there is light in the sky, and life in my veins, so we can be complete once more. The tragedy of the story being that no sooner does the Father get his lost son back, then he loses the other one. The family is again incomplete, there is another empty seat at the table. This will not do.

The Father goes out after his other lost son...

This is a God who is not content with salvation by majority. 50% is not enough according to the third story (two sons and one is lost). 90% is not enough according to the second (10 coins and one is lost). Not even 99% is enough according to the first story (100 sheep and one is missing). This is a God who is committed to the wholeness of life. That means the margins matter. That means no one is insignificant,

because we can't be complete without you!

This is a God who is bold enough, brave enough and shameless enough to go after, and wait out, every lost soul, wayward heart and offended bigot in the universe.

in our book, 'LUKE: The Illustrated Gospel Project' – the conversation between father and son finishes with these words: 'My son, you belong with me and all this is yours too. Do you still not get it? This is your real inheritance. Now you see why we must rejoice. For the one who was nothing to you is waiting for your word of peace; the one who was lost to you has come home. Here is your brother – receive him.'

The Lost Coin

“Suppose a woman who has ten silver coins loses one of them - what does she do?

She lights a lamp, sweeps her house, and looks carefully everywhere until she finds it.

When she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbours together, and says to them, ‘I am so happy I found the coin I lost. Let’s celebrate!’