



WORLDVIEW MADE PRACTICAL
Volume 17 Number 22
June 8, 2022

A Father's Day Parable
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Did you have a favorite teacher when you were growing up? Mine was Mr. Howard who taught Ninth Grade Earth Science. He was an excellent instructor (I can still remember the names of some of the various rock classifications: Igneous, Metamorphic, Sedimentary, etc.). But Mr. Howard also had a great sense of humor. In fact, on the last day of school he got dressed up in a colorful superhero costume one of the students made for him and flew around the room (not literally of course).

Jesus was the master teacher. He knew how to instill in his disciples important principles in ways they (or we) could never forget. One of His most effective teaching methods was telling parables. It is important to know that Jesus' parables were not fables or fantasies. He did not use tortoises, hares, three bears, or any other animals or imaginary beings as did the Greek fabler Aesop. Several good possible definitions for parables have been suggested over the centuries. One good such definition is: "An earthly story with a heavenly meaning." Literally the word "parable" (*parabole*) means "cast alongside." So a parable is a teaching aid cast alongside the truth being taught. It is a story, fact or fiction (but not fantasy) that is "placed beside" to illustrate a moral or spiritual truth. Usually Jesus' parables had just one main point. In chapter 15 of his Gospel, Luke records several of Jesus' parables illustrating God's love for lost humanity.

That being said, with Father's Day coming soon, it is appropriate that we look at one such parable

where Jesus used the love of a father to illustrate the great truth about the love of our Heavenly Father.

Luke 15: 11-32 NASB:

11 And He (Jesus) said, "A man had two sons. 12 The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that is coming to me.' And so he divided his wealth between them. 13 And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey to a distant country, and there he squandered his estate in wild living.

14 Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began doing without. 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed pigs. 16 And he longed to have his fill of the carob pods that the pigs were eating, and no one was giving him anything.

17 But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired laborers have more than enough bread, but I am dying here from hunger! 18 I will set out and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired laborers."' "

20 So he set out and came to his father. But when he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. 21 And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his finger and sandals

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on his feet; 23 and bring the fattened calf, slaughter it, and let's eat and celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' And they began to celebrate."

25 "Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be. 27 And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.'

28 But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him. 29 But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you never gave me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends; 30 but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you slaughtered the fattened calf for him.' 31 And he said to him, 'Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.'"

You probably recognize this passage as what is traditionally called "the Parable of the Prodigal (Wasteful) Son." It should be titled the "Parable of the Loving Father." It is obviously an excellent story for Fathers' Day. But Jesus' intention was not just to tell a nice tale of a father and his sons. He had a much bigger purpose for the parable: to vividly dramatize the way God loves lost humanity.

To understand the true meaning of this drama we first need to examine the main characters: a Father and his two sons. Only by analyzing these individuals in the context of the story can we realize what Jesus intends for it to mean to us. So, let's look at the cast of characters. Remember, these were not real living people, and the story did not actually happen. Jesus used these fictional people in a hypothetical way to make his spiritual teaching point.

The first key person in the tale is the Father. We are told he was a man who had two sons (v. 11). We are never told the father's or the sons' names. Also, Jesus says nothing about the man's wife or if he had any daughters. Those details were irrelevant to Jesus' purpose. In any case, the father is portrayed as a wealthy landowner who had many servants and hired workers (v 17).

Though Jesus does not say so directly, we are led to assume that the father loved his two sons. There is a special bond between fathers and their children. All good fathers (and sad to say, not all are good) want the very best for their sons' and daughters' lives. Of course, even in the same family, siblings will have very different personalities and interests. But a father will love each one the same and do all he can for each of them. This is an important principle to understand in order to comprehend Jesus' parable.

The next character in the story is the younger of the two sons. One day he came to his father and unexpectedly demanded to get what would be his future portion of his father's estate. According to the law, because he was the younger son, he would inherit 1/3 of his father's holdings at his death. The older son would inherit 2/3 of the father's wealth. But, the restless younger son did not want to wait until his father's demise, he wanted his share at that moment (v. 12). Perhaps the father and this son had been at odds for some

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time. Maybe the father realized that the son was going to leave with or without the money (Jesus does not say). In any case, he went ahead and reluctantly gave the boy his share.

Jesus then says the hypothetical wayward son took his loot and went to a far, probably pagan, country. There he squandered it on "wild living." We might wonder what Jesus meant by "wild living" (KJV - "riotous living"; CSB - "foolish living"). Well, people in ancient times had the same kinds of immoral vices that are common now. For example, in the year AD 79, the volcano Mount Vesuvius erupted and buried the Italian resort city of Pompeii under ash and lava killing hundreds of residents. Hundreds of years later, when archaeologists were able to dig through the rocks and soil and uncover the ruins, they were somewhat shocked by what they found. On the walls of the homes and buildings were pornographic paintings depicting all kinds of sexual deviancies in which the Pompeians had engaged. Those same kinds of morally decadent behaviors were probably the ways the son spent his father's money (v. 13).

Jesus says the rebellious son eventually spent all his money. But even more bad luck came his way. Jesus tells that a great famine (or what we might call today an economic depression) swept across the land. The son soon found himself totally bankrupt and did not have enough money even to buy food (v. 14). Finally, he was able to find work feeding swine. For a Jewish person that was the ultimate humiliation. Jews considered pigs physically and spiritually filthy. It was like someone these days working among rats or other vermin (v. 15). Nevertheless, the hungry boy found himself envying the pigs who ate dirty pea pods (v. 16).

Finally, the young man hit bottom and was literally starving. But, Jesus

says, he "came to his senses." Suddenly, he realized how low he had fallen, "How many of my father's hired laborers have more than enough bread, but I am dying here from hunger" (v. 17)! The sad truth, as Jesus makes clear in this parable, is that some people literally have to hit rock bottom to be humbled enough to look up. Unfortunately, far too many people never come to their senses and wind up in prison, on the streets, or dead from their excesses. As we will see, Jesus wants his listeners to know that it need not be the case.

The destitute son decided to travel back home, eat crow, and beg his father to take him back as just a hired hand. He even rehearsed what he was going to say, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired laborers" (vs. 18-19).

So the son trudged back home and eventually approached his father's house. Notice where the father was positioned when saw his son, "But when he was still a long way off ..." (vs. 20-21). The father had obviously been waiting for him to return all along. "... His father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him." The son delivered his previously practiced appeal to his father to employ him as a common laborer (v. 21). The father, however, wrapped him in nice clothes and had a barbeque in his honor (vs. 22-23). Jesus then delivered the key spiritual principle found in this parable, "'For this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' And they began to celebrate"(v. 24).

Now Jesus brings us to the father's second and oldest son. Jesus says that he had been busy working in the field, as always, when his brother returned. When he found out from one of the servants what was hap-

pening, he was resentful of the father's forgiving attitude toward the younger son (vs. 25-30). Note again how the father replied to his elder son's complaints (as told by Jesus), "'Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found'" (vs. 31-32).

Having read and heard this parable, you might ask: exactly what spiritual truth was Jesus trying to teach his disciples and us? To fully comprehend it, or most of Jesus' other parables, we need to discern just who Jesus was representing by the various characters in the account.

First of all, the father clearly represents God the Father. Like the father loved his sons, our Heavenly Father loves all humanity. But He allows people to make good or bad choices in their lives. Because we have free minds we can choose to do what is right or do what is wrong. However, we will face the inevitable consequences of our decisions. Nonetheless, like the father in the parable, God is patiently waiting for sinners to repent and return to Him.

That brings us to the younger son. He obviously represents lost sinners. Those are people who have made bad choices. Of course, that includes all of us! We are all naturally sinful and make bad moral decisions. So, in essence, we all are like this son and have wandered far astray in our own ways. So, in a spiritual sense, we are all dead. Yet, like in the parable, our Heavenly Father is waiting for us to "come to our senses" and return home to Him. And, like the father in the story, He will welcome us with a celebration and say: "for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found!"

As for the older son, he represents those who have made what are considered good choices in their lives (like many long time Christians). Yet, they may fall into the trap of self-righteousness and think they are somehow better than others who have fallen deeper into sin. We must always remember that we were all, at some point, in the same situation as the lost son. We have no room to criticize God's graciousness toward others no matter how undeserving we think they were. We were all in need of the grace of God to be restored.

This Father's Day, if you are a Christian, thank the Heavenly Father for sending His special One and Only Son to die on the cross for your sins so that you could come home to Him. If you have not come to know Christ as your Savior and Lord, just remember that the Father is still waiting.

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