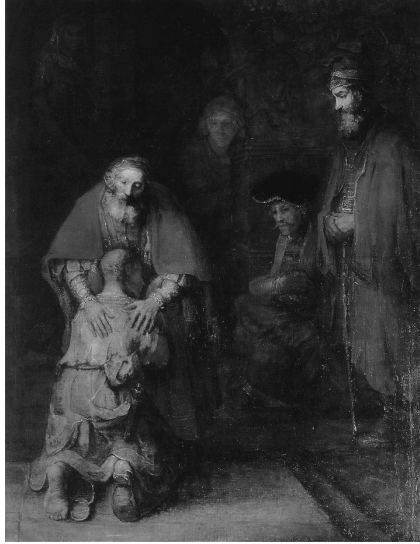


The Story of the Longing Father Luke 15:11-32



Rembrandt's painting of *The Return of the Prodigal Son* gives us a window on the return of the youngest son from his self-imposed exile. Henri Nouwen expressed his fascination with the painting.

"I kept staring at the poster and finally stuttered, 'it's beautiful, more than beautiful... it makes me want to cry and laugh at the same time... I can't tell you what I feel as I look at it, but it touches me deeply.'"

Nouwen continues to say: "When I first saw the *Prodigal Son*, I had just finished an exhausting six-week lecturing trip through the United States, calling Christian communities to do anything they possible could to prevent violence and war in Central America. I was dead tired, so much so that I could barely walk. I was anxious, lonely, restless, and very needy. During the trip I had felt like a strong fighter for justice and peace, able to face the dark world without fear. But after it was all over I felt like a vulnerable little child who wanted to crawl onto its mother's lap and cry. As soon as the cheering or cursing crowds were gone, I experienced a devastating loneliness and could easily have surrendered myself to the seductive voices that promised emotional and physical rest.

It was in this condition that I first encountered Rembrandt's *Prodigal Son* on the door of Simone's office. My heart leapt when I saw it. After my long self-exposing journey, the tender embrace of the father and son expressed everything I desired at the moment. I was, indeed, the son exhausted from long travels; I wanted to be embraced; I was looking for a home where I could feel safe. The son-come-home was all I was and all that I wanted to be. For so long I had been going from place to place; confronting, beseeching, admonishing, and consoling. Now I desired only to rest safely in a place where I could feel a sense of belonging, a place where I could feel at home."

This parable tells us about the Father's heart. Although we are all very different people, the Father wants to see us all around the same table. But first he wants to bring us home, but his love is too great to force, constrain, push or pull. He wants us to freely receive that love.

Discussion Question

Because this story is very familiar, we run the risk of not hearing the story or how it was understood by those listening to Jesus as he told it.

When you hear the story of the prodigal son, what do you think the story of is about?

Cast of Characters

A. Background

The Parable of the Compassionate Father, like other parables, is not just an illustration to make a point. It presents us with an alternate way of looking at the world. A parable first creates a world and then invites the listener to live in that world, to take on the story as part of who he or she is. These biblical stories invite the reader to accept the story as his or her story.

1. The idea that a son would ask his living father for the division of the estate was unthinkable. The younger son's request is equivalent to wishing his father's death, because the only way that the son could take possession of his inheritance was for his father to be dead. The father is in the way of the son's plans and the son wants to move on. So offensive is the idea that the father probably would not have been blamed for killing his impudent son on the spot.

2. The eldest son always received a double portion of an inheritance (Deut. 21:17), i.e. he would receive two-thirds of the estate and the younger brother one-third. The role of the older son in a case like this should be the role of mediator. He should be confronting his younger brother and telling him to beg

forgiveness. He should be interceding with the father begging him to have mercy on his brother. But all that we get from the older son is silence. He also wanted an uncontested division of the estate.

3. In a society stressing obedience to the father, it would be a serious act of rebellion for which the father could have beaten the younger son or worse. When the father grants the younger son's request, it means that most of the hearers could not identify with the father in this parable. From the start, they would think of him as stupidly lax to pamper such an immoral son. In cases where a father divided his estate with his sons while living, both the father and sons were prohibited from independently selling off their parts of the estate.

However, the younger son sells his part of the estate and leaves, depriving his father of the livelihood he was entitled to. Luke 15v13 says "A few days later" the son took his inheritance and left. He no doubt found someone in the village and did the transaction. Why was he in such a hurry? Because he knew that if the village found out what he had done they would have taken him outside of the town and stoned him. He was trying to leave town before his deeds were discovered.

B. The Younger Son – Luke 15v11-19.

1. Based on the narrative above, what effect does the younger son's action have on his relationship with his father?

How is this illustrated by the father's view of the son in v24?

2. According to v13, the younger son "...squandered his wealth in wild living." What happened to him as the result of this wasting of his wealth?

3. **Background note.** According to the Jewish Law, Jews could not eat pigs or touch a pig carcass. Technically, feeding pigs was not prohibited. Yet in Jesus day, the Pharisees would have considered such work unacceptable.

The carob mentioned here is a wild variety which has small fruit which was bitter and not eaten except in desperation.

How does this environment tell us about his situation in life?

4. Verse 17 says: ¹⁷"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! Many commentators have said that the phrase "came to himself" means that he repented. What evidence do we have here to support the idea that he had repented of his actions?

5. Is this repentance or remorse? If he was not repenting, then what was his plan and motives? As one writer said, "This is just one more dumb plan for his life." Notice what he says.

- "I will go to my father and I will say, 'Father, I've sinned against heaven and before you.'" "And I'm no longer worthy to be called your son."
- Next, he says: "Make me one of your hired servants." He knows he can't go back as a son, therefore he says, "I will now go back as somebody who can earn my father's favor again. I will be a good worker or whatever."

a. When the younger son says, "I am not worthy," it can also mean "I am not presently worthy."

b. A hired hand is not a slave. Slaves were at the bottom of the social ladder, and a hired hand was just below a member of the family. Was this a ploy to regain some of his lost status with the father, and perhaps work his way back into the father's graces?

c. His focus is on his financial situation, not on the relationships that he has damaged. Is this real repentance, or is it just a plan for a life?

C. The Father's Response – Luke 15v20-24

1. What was the view of the two sons about their father?
2. What is the response of the father to the appearance of his son?
3. The younger son begins to make his speech, but is unable to finish it because his father interrupts him. What does the father do?
4. **Background Note.** Notice the various points of the father's story:
 - a. The father watches, anticipating the return of his son. If the village people meet the son first, he might be assaulted or worse.
 - b. The father runs to meet the son. This was a humiliating act on the part of the father, something that is not done in Middle Eastern culture, because he would have to pull the hem of his garment up and expose his legs.
 - c. The father hugs and kisses the son. This act signifies complete acceptance and welcome.
 - d. The son is given a robe, which means that the status of the father is given to the younger son.
 - e. The younger son is given a ring, which means that son has the father's authority.
 - f. He is given sandals to wear. Only free people wore sandals, slaves did not.

What do these actions say about the attitude of the father for his lost son?

D. The Older Son – Luke 15v25-32

1. What do we know of the older son's relationship with the father and his younger brother?
2. In v32 the father tells his older son: "But we had to celebrate and rejoice..." The force of the statement is that it designates an unconditional necessity, absolute and unquestioned. Why do you think that the father was so insistent to throw a party for the younger son?
3. When the older son hears the party and sees that his younger brother has returned, how does the older brother respond?

Why did the older brother respond to his father this way?

Was he right to respond to his father this way? Why?
3. The disrespect for the father shown by the older son is very shocking. Not only has he shown his anger toward his brother, he has also embarrassed his father in front of the whole community. How does the father respond to his son?

E. Conclusion

1. Although the younger son had "sinned against heaven and earth," the story does not really tell us about the sins he committed. Why do you think Jesus tells the story this way?

If the story isn't about the sins that the two sons had committed, what is the main theme or focus of the story?

2. The most important theme that runs through this story is *Relationships*. We find the ideas of sin, forgiveness, reconciliation and throwing a party in this parable.

How do these concepts fit into the theme of *relationships*?

F. Application

1. We are not used to the image of God throwing a big party, but when we think of the ways in which Jesus describes the Kingdom of God, a joyful party is often at its center. For the idea of the importance of a banquet, read Matt. 8:11, Matt 22:1-14, and Revelation 19:6-9. In the story of *The Longing Father*, the Father throws a party for his younger son who had returned home, and had invited the older son to join the party as well.

How does the theme of the party illustrate the meaning of the story?

2. There are three different people in this story. They each have a role in this story. Who are they and what does their story tell us about ourselves?

- *The Younger Son* -
- *The Older Son* -
- *The Father* -

3. Has God thrown a party like this for you?

Has he ever invited you to a party that he has thrown for someone else?

4. The final part of the story focuses on the father. The story is not simply that the father of the two sons represents God, Jesus calls us to become like the father to others. How can we do this?

Do you have any “younger brothers” or “older brothers” in your life?

5. Have you ever felt envy or were upset, or even angry, because someone received a blessing from God for something?