

## Still a Great Way Off

Wayne Waibel – 03/27/2022

I've always had a hard time with this parable. I cannot for the life of me get beyond the deep-rooted sense that the elder son really gets the short end of the stick here. His anger and resentment for the father's treatment of his contemptible little brother is totally justified in my mind. I'd feel the same way.

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The whole reason Christ even launches into this parable, and the two which precede it, is in response to the Pharisees griping about the company He is keeping, and even joining at table – a very sacred place in first century Palestine.

There are a number of components to consider that Jesus intentionally includes. One is the fact that the father divides his land up so that he can provide his sons with their inheritance, albeit a little early.

Judaism puts a very high value on the land. To them it is a gift from God to them as the chosen ones. Jesus knew the Pharisees would latch on to that aspect – effectively rendering significantly more weight to the story.

Additionally, the fact that the younger son journeyed to a far-off land would put him outside the sphere of life associated with the customs and allegiances taken for granted at the time of Christ.

What compounds the fragrance of the son's rebellion is that after squandering his inheritance, his only option for survival is as a pig herder. There was no more unclean activity to a Jew in that time than mingling with swine. That this is where the prodigal son, as the King James Version of Luke so eloquently puts it, "came to himself," has far greater impact than it otherwise would.

His realization that even his father's servants live better than he does leads to his decision to return home and repent. The humiliation associated with that action cannot be overstated. His journey back to his old life has to begin with the acceptance that he is not worthy.

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When we wander through our twenties and thirties discovering ourselves and what we believe our true calling is, we often overlook the ramifications of our action. Especially for those that love us and are invested in our future. But we almost never consider how we make God feel.

He, too, wants the absolute best for us – always and forever. And this God of ours had His heart broken at the very beginning of creation.

As soon as Adam and Eve ate of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, He was disappointed, but when Adam responded to God's query, "Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you that you should not eat?" by saying, "The woman **whom you gave to be with me**, she gave me of the tree, and I ate," essentially blaming God – *that* broke His heart.

And still He wants us to get back to that innocence and love of God the Father and all creation and one another. Despite our best efforts to defy God, and second guess Him, and trivialize His simple laws – He still wants us to live an abundant and joyful life. Because He knows that as humans there is one thing to us that is worse than the fear of death, and that is of being lost.

Usually we home in on the eldest son and support his very reasoned observation that while his wayward brother was heavily engaged in sinful pursuits, he himself was respecting, following, obeying, and serving his father. Occasionally we can confess to identifying with the prodigal son as in many ways, whether we admit it or not, he is us.

What we easily lose sight of in all this is the extraordinary grace on display by the father. And that becomes the whole point of the parable. The fact that he began running – imagine that – an elder Jewish man, who probably hasn't even been walking fast for decades – breaks into a full gallop while his son is "still a great way off."

This tells us that he has been scanning the horizon for a sign of his son's return since he first lit out on his own. Much as God always keeps watch for us - his prodigal children.

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When Adam and Eve broke the primal relationship with God, His dream became to renew, repair, restore, and reconcile creation to Himself. It may be argued that everything that has taken place since the beginning of time was designed to return us to paradise.

When Jesus illuminates this concept through the parable of the prodigal son, He is giving the protesting Pharisees and scribes the opportunity to embrace the concept of a God who looks upon all of creation as worthy of forgiveness, and thereby a full life of abundance beyond imagining.

We are the ones who put obstacles in our path. We are the ones with bias and unjust action. We hold contemptible things in high esteem and disregard those things which matter really. This is our time to be open and accepting of others on the basis of seeing them through the eyes of Christ. "Behold, all things have become new."

We were made by God to live a life of love. To be in relationship, harmony, and communion with God, each other, and all creation. This is the message that Jesus walked the earth proclaiming. His sacrifice for our sin paves the way to full redemption and total forgiveness.

The story of the prodigal son is more about the intentional, deeply loving, and infinite providence of God than it is about the ways of His prodigal children. We cannot say we love our neighbors and not help them in their distress.

So it is possible to read something over and over and over again and still find yourself reading it for the first time. Instead of bemoaning the fact that I clearly missed the point of today's lesson until I dug a lot deeper, I think I'll rejoice in having found a truth. Amen.