
Prayers

To God

Lord God Almighty, You have stood before me and confronted me with my need. You have exposed my sin, You have forgiven my heart, You have healed my sickness and You have cleansed my mind. In You I therefore find my peace, my comfort, my joy and my strength. Glory be to You, Lord God Almighty: AMEN

For myself

Give thanks to God for those who truly love you and with whom you have a good and trusting relationship. Ask the Lord to help you keep the highest standards of trust and dependability within your relationships.

For others

Weekly theme: Child abuse

Pray for organisations that deal with sex abuse, For those that help and advise vulnerable people and the police who must follow through allegations and prove wrongdoing

Meditation

The Lord is choosing from amongst His people;
He has work that is pressing and urgent
And is appointing servants, right now.

They are not chosen because they are good or great,
But because they know they need God,
And trust that He is their salvation.

They are not chosen because they pray or read the Bible,
But because they give themselves to God
And will love and serve other people.

They are not chosen because they have conquered sin,
But because they know they need to,
And give themselves to Christ, completely.

They are not chosen because they have special graces,
But because they are open to the Spirit

And use the greater gifts of His grace.

The Lord is choosing from amongst His people;
He is constantly seeking them out
And His book is not closed; it is open ...

Bible Passage

Luke 15:11-24

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 inheritance that will come to me.’

So he divided his inheritance between them. ¹³ Not long after this, the younger son gathered all he had and went to a distant country, where he wasted his wealth with extravagant living. ¹⁴ When everything was gone, there was a severe famine in the land, and he began to go without. ¹⁵ So he went and attached himself to one of the citizens of that country who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs; ¹⁶ he craved the bean pods eaten by the pigs, but no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ ***“But he then came to himself and said,***

‘How many of my father's hired workers have plenty of food, but here am I, dying of hunger! ¹⁸ I will set out and go to my father, and say to him,

“Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you; ¹⁹ I no longer deserve to be called your son, treat me as one of your hired workers.”

²⁰ ***“So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still a long way away, his father caught sight of him and was filled with compassion. He ran and threw his arms around him and embraced him! ²¹ Then the son said,***

‘Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you; I no longer deserve to be called your son ...’

²² ***“But the father said to his servants,***

‘Quickly, bring out the very best robe and clothe him, put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet! ²³ Get the fattened calf and kill it! Let us eat and celebrate,²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found!’

“And they began to celebrate!”

Review

Undoubtedly, this is one of the most memorable and influential parables of Jesus. It is unique to Luke's Gospel, and is a remarkable Biblical passage describing the Father love of God. Along with perhaps the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Sower, it is also one of the most graphic of Jesus' parables, and it is consequently very memorable and appealing. Also, although some of its details are rooted in ancient times, it does not take much for us to grasp its core teaching. In reading its story of Jewish laws of inheritance (15:11,12), first century employment practices and possibly slavery (15:15,17) and feasting on 'fatted' calves (15:23), we readily cross time and cultural boundaries yet have no difficulty with its essential message about the love of God as a 'Father'. Moreover, the love described here is a pure love, constantly ready to forgive, extravagant in practice and full of potential and life, and it presents us with a fundamental truth about God.

As we study this great parable further, we must not forget that so far, we have only read half the story. While this reading alone could be called the 'parable of the Prodigal Son', it is only one half of the full parable. The second half, to be studied tomorrow, describes what happens to the second son, who does not reach the party time at the end of the story line (15:32) via a pathway of excess and rebellion. His anger at his wayward brother tears at the father's heart, but does not supplant this love, and as we will find tomorrow, there are important truths to be found within this challenging conclusion.

It is nevertheless worth studying today's passage for itself, for as we begin to explore, its message is not always as obvious as we might think. It certainly describes the inexhaustible love of God, but is this all we need to know about God's love? Some think so, and they regard this love as the love that saves us. This sounds fine at first but we must be cautious. The parable contains no hint of the coming sacrifice of Christ's death and resurrection, which the Gospel tells us is basic measure of the saving love of God. So we must be very careful. God's 'Father' love is amazing and surpasses all human love, but this parable does not reveal everything we need to know about God's saving love; it describes this essential, perhaps vital element. Yet there is more for us to discover, and this warns us not to take a parable like this and make more of it than our Lord intends.

The picture of the Father here describes God, but be careful, the two are not identical. For example, we cannot assume that just like the Father here, God 'waits at home' while people wander from Him, inactive while they decide whether or not to return. To stretch the meaning of the parable this far is to deny what the rest of Scripture says about God 'seeking out' the sinner, as Jesus has just taught in the 'Parable of the Lost Sheep'! So when we interpret this parable, we must focus on its conclusion, not on its details.

So, in looking at the whole of Luke 15, the love of God described by Jesus looks for one from a hundred sheep (15:1-6), will not give up on a lost coin (15:7-11), and welcomes back the worst of repentant sinners, a son who has squandered his father's possessions (12-24). The general picture is that God's love is therefore searching, persistent, passionate and long-suffering.

The parable has one more important feature; the love of God is found capable of forgiving even the worst sinner. We may be surprised that the Father is so complete and fulsome in his welcome of the foolish and repentant son. Surely, we say, the father is thinking 'you fool, why did you do this'? But the story avoids any such hint. The father's love is utterly genuine and completely forgiving, which is astounding and radical. For it is through such love that God ultimately forgives His own Son when He bears the sin of humanity on the Cross, and it is the quality of love by which God saves people to this very day.

The parable begins with two sons, one who obediently remains with his father, and the other who seeks his inheritance and absconds; we can imagine the picture. A number of Bible stories come to mind, for example, Ishmael and Isaac, and Jacob and Esau. In ancient times the eldest son could expect to receive a favoured 'double portion' of a man's wealth as his inheritance (see Deuteronomy 21:17). Nevertheless, as Scripture illustrates repeatedly (in the stories of the patriarchs within Genesis, a father can favour his sons as he wishes while he is alive. So the younger son's request was not of itself greedy, it could be interpreted as an astute move to ensure he received as generous a share as possible, before formal inheritance laws came into effect to limit his potential 'share'.

A story about two sons is not unique in Jesus teaching. In Matthew 21:28f. Jesus describes two sons, one who says he will do the father's work but does not, and the other who says he will not do it, but does. The prodigal son bears more than a passing resemblance to the son who eventually works having initially refused to do so, to receive his father's blessing. In both stories the father's love has the same quality, it is essentially forgiving, taking the long term view of people's destiny and fulfilment in the Kingdom of God.

This is a wonderful and extensive narrative, longer than many others taught by Jesus, and fascinating in its detail. We wonder at the shame of a Jew reduced to caring for unclean pigs (15:15f.), and after gasping at the dire poverty of famine (15:14), are relieved when the son accepts that his only course of action is turn around and go home. His mind has not failed him and he knows there is a simple solution to his life, providing he acknowledges his foolishness and risks his father's rebuke (15:18,19). The story of the return is a masterpiece of brief narrative;. Not only are we astonished that the father is ready and waiting for the return (15:20), we are bowled over by his generosity. Before the son can recite all his prepared confession (15:21, the father brushes aside his son's guilt and shame with jubilation. A party will be held!

Of course, Jesus wants us to see that this is a description of the father's heart towards us. The details of how we return to Him and are received will be different for each one, but the Heart that drives the love is the same. This is our God, and He wants to rejoice at our repentance (15:24)! It is with this in mind that we must read the last and infinitely more tragic part of this famous story (tomorrow).

Going Deeper

Notes on the text and translation

V14 'he began to go without'

Other translations:

'he began to be in need' (NIV)

'he began to starve' (New Living)

The Greek phrase here translates literally as *'he began to lack'*. Because it does not say what exactly, this could mean almost anything from starvation to lack of money. As a result there are many different translations offered by the Bible versions, reflecting from being in need to starvation.

V15 'went and attached himself to ...'

Other translations:

'went and hired himself out to ...' (NIV)

'went and joined himself to ...' (NRSV)

The idea of the son hiring himself out is common in the translations. However, the Greek says *'attached himself to'*, which is not a common phrase. If the man hired himself out as a labourer or slave there was perfectly good Greek to describe this but Luke did not use it. It is possible that the son was so poor and needy that he was not usable as a slave or employable as a labourer. His attachment was an arrangement of convenience rather than formal slavery with the social safeguards of the day.

V17 *'but he then came to himself and said ...'*

Other translations:

'when he came to his senses ...' (NIV)

'but when he came to himself ...' (NRSV)

The Greek sentence says this, literally, 'He then came to himself ...', and I see no reason to change this, because it makes perfectly good sense in today's English!

Further Comments

The sons - a misinterpretation?

If there are difficulties in trying to find out more about God within the figure of the father, the same is true of the characters of the two sons. This theory suggests that if we want to find out the meaning of the parable, we must work out who the two sons 'represent'; but there are dangers.

The sons are not, as one commentary suggests, 'unrepentant Jews' and 'religious Jews'. This theory may appear obvious, but it attempts to take the political and religious divisions of Jesus' day and see in them some concrete meaning relevant for our own times. But where will these assumptions take us, when this interpretation hardly allows us to apply the parable to the vast majority of people?

We should not caricature the individual figures in the parable more than saying that the father illustrates the love of God, and the two sons represent two ways of responding to Him. Certainly, in Jesus' day, the son that stayed at home might best be identified with Jews. In tomorrow's study, we will find that they do not respond well to the Gentiles, who have sinned like the prodigal son, and then gain God's love and forgiveness without having done anything to deserve it apart from repent! I expect that such sentiments were expressed more than once in the days of the early church!

However, the two sons speak to us differently today, because the picture painted by the parable has more than one application. Perhaps the most obvious is that the sons represent people brought up in the Christian 'family', one remaining with the church and in touch with the 'father' and the other going his own way, with the consequences identified in the parable. The father's love then represents the heart of God as Evangelist, forgiving all who repent and turn to Him. But there is more for us tomorrow!

Demonstrating forgiveness physically - the hug

As the son returns and the father runs to meet him (15:22f.), the father reveals his love in two ways. Firstly he shows abundant physical affection (15:20), and secondly he orders '*the very best robe*', '*a ring and sandals*' (15:22) and commencing a party, '*get the fattened calf and kill it*' (15:23).

The hug of affection described here is worth highlighting. Generations of people, certainly in British society, have stood well back from showing such affection in public, if at all. But Scripture is surprisingly full of emotional displays, and God's Word frequently encourages us to reveal and use our emotions. Jesus' story of the prodigal son is at its most moving when we read about the father's extravagant greeting (15:20), and the value of this is that it reveals what it is like to meet God the Father! Of course we cannot receive a physical 'hug' from God now, but we can share such emotions with each other, and minister to each other the 'feel' of true affection, repentance and forgiveness, perhaps even God's love.

As an aside, other passages of Scripture surprise us with their sense of emotional openness and freedom. One of these is Paul's call to the Corinthians and others to share a 'holy kiss' (2 Cor 16:20, 1 Thess 5:26). Another is Solomon's candid poem on sex and love, the 'Song of Songs'. The Bible never ceases to surprise.

Demonstrating forgiveness physically - the party

In order to demonstrate his forgiveness, the father throws a party, but first greets his son with practical and demonstrative gifts that represent his return to the family 'fold' (15:22,23).

As we know from the famous story of Joseph and his coat of 'many colours' (Genesis 37:3, though some translations say 'coat of long sleeves'), some clothes had special meaning in ancient times as well as today. We can safely assume that a coat described as the '*very best*' (15:22) was a symbol of status within a family, certainly favour. Remember, the son had already claimed all he was entitled to, so this coat and everything else he received came through the pure generosity of the father, and by implication, out of the pocket of the other son!

The other items mentioned are the ring and the sandals (15:22). The ring denotes power and authority, and the sandal represents restoration. From the point of view of those who read this story, the gifts indicate God's graciousness to those who return to Him for their salvation.

The idea of killing a '*fattened calf*' is used throughout the Bible as a sign of an important feast (see also Genesis 18:7f. 1 Samuel 28:24), and we will explore the meaning this and the party for which it is used in the next study.

Discipleship

Application

The loving heart of God that responds to repentance

At various times in our lives, we tend to think of God in any one of a number of ways. Of course, we see Him as 'Judge' at the moment we do something wrong, or we call on Him for His strength when we need help, or we admire His creative power in the Universe when we look at His world. All these things are part of the rich tapestry of appreciation we may offer our God. This parable reminds us however that there is something more central to the heart of God, and this is His love; and as is true for all of us, real love is demonstrated and

experienced in the act of forgiveness. Forgiveness is practical love, you cannot have one without the other, for the two are inseparable.

So when we are feeling worried about things, when we doubt ourselves, or when we feel that everything is going wrong or we have failed, we should return to remember that our God is a God of super-abundant love, more than anything else. He cares, and just like the father who comes running out to meet the prodigal son with abandon and blissful love, He longs to greet us when we return to Him. Knowing this as Christians, I do not understand why we fail to return to Him as much as we ought!

The cost of repentance

Have you known what it is like to repent of something you know you have done wrong? Not just in terms of having committed some foul sin, but also in the sense of having strayed from the mark, or not lived up to your words. We must remain aware that repentance is about dealing with such things and not being afraid to do this. It is a constant temptation for some people to stand aloof from things that happen to go wrong in their lives as if there is nothing they can do about it. This may or may not be the case, but spiritually sensitive souls will accept their role in all that goes wrong and be eager to repent. This is the true route to healing and reconciliation, in the Father's powerful and effective love .

Ideas for what to do

- Take the opportunity to reflect on whether you have indeed repented for your involvement in those things that are wrong in your life? Wait on the Lord in prayer about this, so that you do not miss something important. The Holy Spirit will guide you if you give Him the chance.
- Pray for those you know who may be in the position of the 'prodigal', in a modern sense. Pray that you will, like the father in this story and like God Himself, be ready for the return of the prodigal, and ready to show practical love in forgiveness.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What does this passage teach us about God's heart for the lost; describe what you imagine God's feelings to be towards those who are lost today, in sin, in other faiths, in rebellion against him etc.
2. Is it necessary to wander from the Lord before returning? Give examples of positive and negative answers to this question.
3. In what ways do people rebel against God today? Imagine a scenario today that delivers a similar story ending, and share this in your group.

Final Prayer

Lord God Almighty, You are wonderful! You seek out people in need and tell them You care; You transform lives and give hope; You give encouragement to those who have been oppressed; You stand beside the lonely in their need! Yet you do so much more, for You save those who consequently trust in You, stay with you, walk Your pathways and choose to believe in You. We praise You for the greatness of Your salvation, Lord God; **AMEN!**

