
Prayers

To God

Weekly theme: Accepting the Future

It can be hard for some to think about the future because life is too difficult and hard. The Lord delights to bring light to our pathway and bring us to a place of trust in Him, if, that is, we will let go of our fears and look at Him, not the problems. Seek to do this, now, in prayer.

For myself

Pray fervently for the salvation of your friends and for the guidance of the Holy Spirit that will enable you to relate to them effectively and well, especially in appropriate evangelism.

For others

I thank You, Lord God for the many people who work tirelessly on my behalf, as public servants in law and order, in the emergency services, in public health, in education, in government, and in the regulation of the society in which I live. I benefit so much from my world and my country, may I not be so ignorant as to fail to give thanks for the benefits I enjoy and the people who provide them. AMEN

Meditation

The politician works to organise and control the world.

But Christ knows the exact path of history;
He deals with the evil that suffocates our world.

The economist gives advice based on financial projections.

But Christ knows the true value of everything;
He reveals everything about the future to His own.

The entrepreneur seeks opportunities to generate wealth.

But Christ is the source and the destiny of all;
He gives away everything with incomparable love.

The celebrities think personality will conquer the world.

But Christ has no need to gain people's plaudits;
His death yields so much more for us than fame.

The people of this world who are 'great' are but transient,
Whilst Christ is forever; His love will never end!
He defines true fame through His Resurrection!

Bible Passage

Luke 15:25-32

25 "Now his elder son was working in the field, but as he came near to the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 He called one of the servants to ask what was going on, 27 and he replied,

'Your brother has arrived, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back in good health.'

28 "The elder son then became angry and would not go in. His father came out and begged him, 29 but he replied,

'Look! I have worked like a slave for you all these years, and I have never disobeyed your order. Yet you have never given me as much as a young goat so I can celebrate with my friends! 30 But as soon as this son of yours comes back after squandering your property with prostitutes, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

31 "The father said to him,

'My son, you are always with me and all I have is yours; 32 we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this your brother was dead and has come to life! He was lost, and has been found!'"

Review

Many people believe they know the parable of the 'Prodigal Son', but only mean the first part of the story told by Jesus (15:11-24); not everyone remembers the full parable which includes the story of the elder son (15:25-32). The second half of this parable is almost as long as the first, but it is wholly about the elder son, who has stayed at home to work throughout the drama of his brother's profligate life and subsequent return. When he discovers what has happened, his anger is roused by his feelings of injustice at how he has been treated. As we find in everyday life, what proves wonderful for one person can feel like a disaster for another.

But is this really true of this story? What is Jesus' final message here? I suggest that in the entire parable, Jesus uses the figure of the father to point us to the possibility of conflict resolution through forgiveness. This was clearly what lies behind the father's acceptance of the younger son. The father has to stand firm against his elder son's appeal (15:29,30), but he nevertheless stands ready to forgive his outburst of sinful jealousy, and appeals to him to rejoice and 'party' with him (15:32). All that is needed for reconciliation is for the elder son to repent of his anger and jealous heart, and we are left wondering whether he will!

Whoever you think are represented by the sons within this story, and however you interpret the parable, its ending focusses the reader on the importance of forgiveness and repentance.

For example, if the figure of the elder son represents the Pharisees, as many people think, then we are left wondering whether any of them will ever hear God's call to repent when faced with the truth of His love. We therefore wonder whether this parable means that the Jews as a whole will ever respond to their God as to a Father, when the time comes for Him to accept into His Kingdom repentant sinners from outside Judaism.

On the other hand, you may justifiably find in this passage a picture of Christian people today, perhaps even yourself. It perhaps reflects those who have spent their lives attempting to do God's will, but who find it difficult when others who have not 'laboured in the field' for very long suddenly arrive and receive what seems a 'higher' place and influence within the church! In this case, our passage presents a strong challenge to such people to desist from jealousy towards new converts, and to embrace unreservedly the Father's uniquely forgiving love. This is a tough call, but it is fundamental to the principles of the Gospel, as Jesus says elsewhere when describing a vineyard owner's response to angry workers who get equal pay regardless of work done, '*am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?*' (Matt 20:15).

All this is highly significant, and for some, it represents an adequate interpretation of this passage. But we will now look again at the narrative, in order to discover what else we can learn from this great story.

The whole parable describes extreme contrasts, and they are all designed to throw a greater spotlight on the father's love and his unconditional forgiveness. Throughout the second half of the story there is a party going on, in the background. We learned yesterday that the father began the party immediately the younger son returned, and by the time the elder son came in, it was in full swing with '*music and dancing*' (15:25), and no expense was spared. Today, a hog roast provides the centre of a fashionable outdoor party, but it was a '*fattened calf*' (15:23,27) in those days. Standing outside the party, the elder son learned the truth and refused to enter the party, thus requiring the father to come out and speak to him (15:28). There was an unresolved argument about parties (15:28-32), and the elder son complained bitterly that he has never been allowed to have such a party, even for friends.

We should look carefully at this complaint, however, for in his anger, the elder son succumbs to all manner of sins. He speaks in a terrible and insulting way about his brother, saying to his father, '*this son of yours*' (15:30) and by standing outside, refuses to see him. In his outburst, he accuses his brother of squandering his father's wealth with '*prostitutes*' (15:30), but this is stretching what is reported in the first part of the story. This says that the younger son squandered his father's wealth with '*reckless living*' (15:13), a phrase that implies much, but not necessarily prostitution or sexual extravagance.

The elder son also complains that his father has never given him a party; but the father reminds the elder son that he has complete authority in the household, he says '*all I have is yours*' (15:31). In truth, the elder son's complaint is one of feeling rather than fact, for with this authority, he could have had a party whenever he wanted. In truth, he probably felt excluded because he had never been the subject of his father's excited compassion and impromptu extravagance.

Perhaps the most significant feature of the passage is the teaching it gives us on forgiveness. In the parable of the prodigal son, the father's forgiveness derives from his selflessness, which is contrasted with the anger and self-justification of the elder son. A heart of forgiveness is also the difference between the gladness and joy in the heart of the father and the bitterness and envy in the heart of the son. In addition, forgiveness is the reason for joy within the party, but the son who will not enter into it stands in anguished self pity. Lastly, forgiveness means the father can liberate one son, but because it will not be received by the elder son, we are left in tension, waiting to see his fate.

If we look at the conclusion of the parable of the prodigal son with care, it has much to teach us about human relationships and the power of forgiveness, especially within families. It is not an easy passage of Scripture to read or for a preacher to expound, but it contains some discerning truths about God's love. It also describes the Father's joy at the salvation of the lost son (15:32), and the consequences of either repentance or non-repentance in the hearts of those who have been challenged by this evidence of the Father's love.

Going Deeper

Notes on the text and translation

V25 'dancing'

This is the same translation used in all Bible versions, but its derivation means something a little more than 'dancing' in the sense we use it today. The Greek word 'choros' will itself remind us that this dance is also something 'sung'. And throughout history, song and dance go together!

V27 'in good health'

Other translations:

'safe and sound' (NIV)

'safe return' (New Living)

The Greek word here is mostly translated 'safe and sound', which is fair enough. However its core meaning is about possessing good health, and I have therefore sought to convey this. The father rejoices in receiving the son back in his arms not 'whatever the cost', but in reasonable condition; that is the point of my translation.

Further Comments

The heart of the elder son

This part of the parable focusses on the heart of the elder son, who is unable to repent and be forgiving as the father has been. Like so many people in the midst of an unexpected circumstance, his emotions are fixed by the first information he receives about the situation, in this case, obtained from a servant (15:27). Would it have been a different story if the father had spoken to him first?

The immediate reaction of the son is anger, one of the four key human emotions, which are love, anger, fear and guilt. Any of these emotions are hard to shift, and once established, colour every other aspect of a person's life. Of course there are many other emotions, but studies today suggest that these, especially anger, dominate people's actions once triggered. Of course, God has made everyone capable of change, but some changes are harder than others, and as many counsellors know, anger can be hidden in the soul and persist as a trigger to someone's entire life, for a very long time.

The father's appeal to the elder son is as much for his redemption from the sins of anger and jealousy as for acceptance of the younger son. He loves them both for who they are and

wants them both to accept each other and himself. There is surely a parable in this for us now.

Celebrating at special events, and 'party'

We who go to church to worship God on Sundays too easily forget that in the Bible, the worship of God happens mostly in response to special events. In the Old Testament, the life of God's people developed around special 'harvest festival' events, each of which had elaborate festive worship of Almighty God (see Exodus 22:29, 23:16, 34:21, Leviticus 23). In the New Testament, we have no clear picture of regular worship in the early Christian church, but we do have plenty of descriptions of people worshipping God when great things happened, after Jesus has healed someone (Matt 8:4), or after the release of Peter (Acts 4:24f.).

The picture of the party here in this passage is one of worship, and the parable asks us to consider whether 'party' is an appropriate way for us to think of worshipping God. The idea is something like this; God has done something for us, so let us give Him thanks, not in a few days time when we worship Him regularly, but NOW!

Discipleship

Application

Forgiveness

There is teaching about forgiveness throughout the Bible, sometimes in surprising places. The story of Joseph in the Old Testament (Genesis 37 to end) is another powerful example of a substantial story, which teaches very similar things about the love of God through forgiveness. In this instance the forgiveness is shown by Joseph, the son, where in our story it is shown by the father. Another story of forgiveness is that of David, who committed adultery and yet was forgiven by God in quite exceptional circumstances; and the resulting psalm (psalm 50) is a classic psalm of forgiveness which has blessed many. It is an example of what the father might hope the elder son might say having calmed down from his anger.

³ For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. ⁴ Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment ... ⁹ Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. ¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

These and other great Scriptures all point eventually to the forgiveness of God, which forgives even the enormous sin borne for us by Jesus on the Cross, and which raised Him to life as described here by Paul in Ephesians:

⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace ⁸ that he lavished on us. (Eph 1:7-8 NRS)

³ All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. ⁴ But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which He loved us ⁵ even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ-- by grace you have been saved - ⁶ and raised us up with Him and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the ages to come He might show the immeasurable

riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God. (Ephesians 2:3-8)

Conflict resolution

Some people think that because conflict is a part of life, we must live with it; but such an attitude implies that the elder son should never have to turn from his anger or confront his prejudices. The Christian way is always to attempt to resolve conflicts, because the Kingdom of God is a place of peace and reconciliation before almighty God. Those who seek to put such Gospel truths into practice know that we can never completely eliminate conflict in this world, but it is God's will that we try. Like the father in the story of the Prodigal Son, they will seek to persuade the angry, bitter, and jealous to turn and repent, and be forgiven.

This is the work of all who seek to counsel others. It is also the work of those who strive to find solutions to problems, whether in industry, the church, in politics or in war. Like the father in this passage, an appeal to love and compassion must be made however bleak the chances seem of this advice being heeded.

Ideas for what to do

- Examine yourself and judge whether you have ever been guilty of feeling somewhat like the elder son. In what circumstances have you felt this, and what, if anything, can you do about this now?
- Have you ever experienced worship that is like a full swing 'party', in which the Father is honoured and people are blessed through enjoying themselves? Is there any mileage in pursuing the idea of worship as 'party'?

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Imagine yourself as the elder son. How does this make you feel, and is the son justified in his anger? What do you judge to lie at the heart of the son's words?
2. Imagine yourself as the father in the story. How does the rejection of the elder son make you feel, and what do you think you should do about him?
3. What does this story teach you about 'forgiveness' and practical love?

Final Prayer

Thank You Lord Jesus, for the love you have revealed to us within the Father's heart! We praise You for the teaching found in the parable of the 'Prodigal Son', and we ask You to write this on our hearts. May we seek to be as forgiving as the Father in our families and at church, and may we learn to celebrate His love in this life so that we can 'party' in the next!

AMEN