

## “The Prodigal”

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

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This masterpiece is *The Return of the Prodigal Son* by the Dutch painter Rembrandt. It was one of the last works Rembrandt painted before he died in 1669. It is one of many artistic interpretations of this parable from Luke’s gospel. Indeed, Rembrandt himself painted and etched several versions of this story over the course of his career. This one is perceived by many to be his definitive interpretation.

The painting depicts the climactic moment in the parable, when the prodigal son returns home, into the loving embrace of his father. The elder brother stands on the right side of the painting, looking upon his younger brother with scorn and judgment. Nearby are a couple household servants, one older, one younger, both looking on in awe. In the upper left of the painting, standing in an arched doorway, is the young man’s mother, mostly in shadow, wearing a red pendant that matches the red cloaks worn by her husband and her elder son. She’s not mentioned in the original parable, but Rembrandt added her, reminding us that she, too, had been impacted by the drama in the family. But the focus in the painting is on the three main characters in the parable: the wayward son, the loving father, the resentful brother.

The story begins with younger son: “Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.” That is: *I want my inheritance, Dad, and I want it now.* He does not say “please.” He does not ask. It is not a request; it is a *demand*. This younger son is impetuous and impatient. The father – for some reason – consents. Why? Couldn’t he have just said, “No”? Or had this son been making demands for years? Maybe the father was tired of arguing. Maybe he sensed that his son was already lost to him.

So the father divides his estate and gives his younger son the share that would have been his inheritance. The son then travels to a faraway land, a distant country, somewhere completely removed from his home, his family, and whatever values his father and mother had tried to instill in him. There, he wastes all his wealth in wild extravagance. The Bible doesn’t tell us how much money he spent. But there’s no question it was a fair chunk of change. The word “prodigal” means “wasteful.” One of Rembrandt’s earlier paintings depicts this phase of the young man’s life. Some people call it *The Prodigal Son in the Tavern*. Others call it *The Prodigal Son in the Brothel*. He’s holding a flask of wine in one hand and a woman in the other. She is sitting on his lap. What is particularly interesting about this painting is that the man’s face is Rembrandt’s own. Perhaps he identified with this story. Perhaps many of us identify with this story. That time in our life when we wandered from the fold, indulged ourselves, spent too much, drank too much, gambled too much, slept around too much, did too many drugs, wasted a lot of time on foolish pursuits, made a lot of mistakes that we can never go back and undo.

Sometimes, in the moment, it feels good to indulge yourself. But we pay the price for it later on,

when we take stock of everything we've lost, the relationships we've ruined, the vows we have broken, the values we have betrayed. This young man paid a price, a *big* price. He had used up his entire inheritance. There was no more coming to him – *ever*. Then a famine strikes the land. Now there's no food. No good jobs. No way to earn a decent living. He wakes up in the mornings ... and he's *hungry*.

Desperate, he hires himself out to a landowner, who sends him out into the fields to feed the pigs. (This pen drawing is also by Rembrandt.) Of all creatures, *pigs!* Jesus told this story to a Jewish audience. According to the Law of Moses, pigs were "unclean" animals. Any Jew who touched a pig was considered impure. They were forbidden from taking part in religious ceremonies until they went through a process of purification. Assuming this young man was Jewish, every day when he fed the pigs that had been entrusted to him, he reinforced the reality that he was living a life that was *far* from God. He had not only squandered his inheritance and turned his back on his family; he also rejected his faith. Of course, he had already done that, by all the choices he had made, but it just kept getting worse.

He earns a few coins from his work, but it's not enough. He asks other people for help. No one offers him anything. He's so hungry he even thinks about eating the husks the pigs were chewing. Once he had been sitting in the lap of luxury. Now, he is barely scraping the bottom of the barrel.

Thankfully, God is still with us, still *speaks* to us, even when we have wandered *far* from God.

Something happens to the young man out there in those fields. Literally, the Greek says, "he came to himself." The person he had been all this time was not who he *really* was. When we wander away from God, when we turn our back on our family and our faith and our core values, that is *not* who we really are. We might think that we are experiencing some sort of "freedom;" we might think that we are "finding ourselves;" but often what we are doing is just becoming someone who we really *aren't*. This young man found himself, all right. He found himself when he was dirt poor, ravenously hungry, and stinking like swine. He looked at what he was doing, who he had become, and he realized: *This is not who God made me to be. Even my father's servants – the ones who took care of me! – have better jobs, more money, and more food than I do.* It's a remarkable realization, an epiphany of enormous magnitude. And he's right. The son realizes how far he's fallen. Sometimes we think our life is *perfectly fine* until there comes a painful moment when we suddenly realize: *I have royally screwed this up.*

Some people never reach that point. Sometimes people want their life to be dramatically different; sometimes people are willing to admit that they made some significant mistakes along the way; they can look back and point to decisions they made that they wish they had made differently – but they don't experience the kind of *heart change* that this young man experienced. This young man was able to swallow his pride and let *God* work in his heart. This young man was willing to *change*.

He says: "I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" Look at his *integrity*. He doesn't blame other people for the things that have gone wrong in his life. He takes an honest assessment of his life, he sees *his own sin*, and he *resolves to make it right*.

This is called *repentance*. It's not just an acknowledgment of sin. It's a willingness to *change*.

"There will be more joy in heaven," Jesus says, "over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." Here's an example of one sinner who repents.

The young man makes his way home. “While he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.” Rembrandt captures this moment. The son, wearing tattered rags and worn-out sandals, anguish on his face. The father, reaching out, tenderly, lovingly. Notice his hands. The father’s left hand – the one on our right – is big, strong, muscular. The father’s right hand – on our left – is smaller, gentler, more ... graceful.

The father, of course, represents *God*. God has two hands. There is the stern, strong hand of judgment. And there is the loving, tender hand of mercy and grace. The Bible is full of stories about God’s judgment. The Bible is also full of stories about God’s mercy and grace. God responds to our deeds with one hand or the other, *depending on the state of our heart*. Are we repentant, or prideful? The young man in the parable returned home repentant. He received the hand of mercy and grace.

The father throws a party for the son who had been lost but now was found. “Bring out the best robe,” he says, “and put it on him. Get the fatted calf, and kill it. We’re going to celebrate!”

Jesus told this parable to a bunch of scribes and Pharisees. They were grumbling because tax collectors and prostitutes had been coming to listen to Jesus. Those tax collectors and prostitutes were like the prodigal son. They were trying to figure out how to turn their lives around, how to get out of the mess they were in. Their hearts were repentant. Jesus was offering them mercy and grace. But the scribes and the Pharisees were stuck in their pride. Jesus gives them the hand of judgment.

Now the elder son was out in the field when his brother came home. He doesn’t know what has happened. When he approaches the house, he hears the sound of merrymaking. He asks one of the servants what’s going on. When he learns that his brother has come home, he is *furious*. Furious ... and insanely jealous. He confronts his father. “All these years I’ve been working like a slave for you! I’ve never disobeyed you! You’ve never even given me a *goat* so that I can have some have a little feast with my friends. But when this son of yours” – not “this brother of mine” – “when this *son of yours* came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!”

The elder son’s problem is that he can only see what his younger brother did that was *wrong*. Not what his younger brother did that was *right*. He only sees the *sin*. He fails to notice the *repentance*. He is only able to offer the hand of *judgment*. He needs to be able to offer the hand of *mercy and grace*.

The problem that the scribes and the Pharisees had was similar: they could only see the *wrong* that the tax collectors and the prostitutes had been doing. They couldn’t see the repentance. They could only offer a hand of *judgment*. They needed to be able to offer a hand of *mercy and grace*.

“Son,” the father says, “you are always with me. All that is mine is yours. But we *had* to celebrate. This *brother of yours* was dead and has come back to life. He was lost and has been found.”

There are times when that firm hand of judgment is necessary. Times when someone truly needs to be told, “What you are doing is wrong,” if they can’t see that truth for themselves. But there are also times when that same person needs to be told, “I love you, and it doesn’t matter what you did,” because they already figured out on their own that they royally screwed up. They don’t need to be told again. What they need now is to know – and to feel – and to *experience* – the mercy and grace of God.

“We *had* to celebrate and rejoice.... He was lost and has been found.” Thanks be to God.

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