## The Prodigal Son, the Waiting Father, and the Judging Brother

*Jesus also told them another story:*

 *Once a man had two sons. The younger son said to his father, "Give me my share of the property." So the father divided his property between his two sons.*

*Not long after that, the younger son packed up everything he owned and left for a foreign country, where he wasted all his money in wild living. He had spent everything, when a bad famine spread through that whole land. Soon he had nothing to eat.*

*He went to work for a man in that country, and the man sent him out to take care of his pigs. He would have been glad to eat what the pigs were eating, but no one gave him a thing. Finally, he came to his senses and said, "My father's workers have plenty to eat, and here I am, starving to death! I will go to my father and say to him, `Father, I have sinned against God in heaven and against you. I am no longer good enough to be called your son. Treat me like one of your workers’. "*

*The younger son got up and started back to his father. But when he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt sorry for him. He ran to his son and hugged and kissed him. The son said, "Father, I have sinned against God in heaven and against you. I am no longer good enough to be called your son."*

*But his father said to the servants, "Hurry and bring the best clothes and put them on him. Give him a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. Get the best calf and prepare it, so we can eat and celebrate. This son of mine was dead, but has now come back to life. He was lost and has now been found." And they began to celebrate. The older son had been out in the field. But when he came near the house, he heard the music and dancing. So he called one of the servants over and asked, "What's going on here?"*

*The servant answered, "Your brother has come home safe and sound, and your father ordered us to kill the best calf." The older brother got so angry that he would not even go into the house. His father came out and begged him to go in. But he said to his father, "For years I have worked for you like a slave and have always obeyed you. But you have never even given me a little goat, so that I could give a dinner for my friends. This other son of yours wasted your money on prostitutes. And now that he has come home, you ordered the best calf to be killed for a feast." His father replied, "My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we should be glad and celebrate! Your brother was dead, but he is now alive. He was lost and has now been found."*

Luke 15: 11-32

## Background

Socialist have determined that this is the best known short story in the world. Shakespeare referred to it more than any other parable. Commentators maintain it is at the heart of Luke’s Gospel and perhaps the entire New Testament. The phrase “the Prodigal Son” is not found anywhere in Bible. That name discounts the equally important roles of the loving father and the older brother.

The story itself is really quite outrageous. It may be difficult to imagine everyday life for a Mid-Eastern family two thousand years ago, but this sort of thing just never happened! Jesus’ audience knew it too! First, there’s the son who prematurely asked his father for his share of the inheritance. Such a request was like saying, “Gee Dad, I wish you were dead!” The son wanted to live the good life, immediately!

Amazingly the father granted the request. No father could be that good! He was willing to allow his precious child to have complete freedom of choice. What love this parent must have had! Most parents would refuse such a request or argue with the wayward child. Not here!

Jesus’ audience was hooked. The plot was so outrageous that they couldn’t wait to hear what happened next. Besides, the story addressed issues that every parent identifies with, “What to do with a troublesome child?”

The son took off for distant lands (a foreign country). He squandered the money with loose living. The words mean, “debauched living or pagan depravity such as revels, licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, carousing, and lawless idolatry" (1 Peter 4: 3).

Famine struck the land and the son was starving. The only job he could find was tending pigs (a great offense for any respectable Jew!). The young man’s humiliation was complete. Jesus’ listeners probably felt he got what he deserved!

In that moment of crisis, the son repented. The word “repents” means to “turn the other way.” He “came to himself” and acknowledged that he’d sinned against both God and his father. He did not deserve to be called his father’s son. A plan of salvation began to form. He’d return home and offer to be his father’s servant. Even a humble servant in his father’s home was better off than he was. This worldly slave was seeking a new freedom in his father’s house.

The story then centered on the father. No image comes closer to the true character of God than that of the waiting father. This parent was waiting for the son to return. When he saw the son, he unabashedly ran out to greet him. Outrageous behavior! No reasonable, self-respecting parent would forgive the child nor disgrace himself by running in public. It just wasn’t done. It was a loss of dignity. It was humiliating! But God’s grace defies human logic because it is astounding and abundant! The foolishness of God exceeds our wisdom.

The father embraced the son before anyone could turn him away. The father did not wait for any apology or explanation. The father accepted the son because he simply showed up. This was agape. This was heavenly love. The son was welcomed and the celebration began.

The older son showed up. There are many Biblical stories of brothers in conflict (Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers). The older brother was outraged! He insulted his father by refusing to join the celebration. The anger was obvious as this son made unproven accusations against his brother involving prostitutes. There was hatred in his heart. The father’s heart was broken. This son rejected the greatest inheritance of all, a father’s love. The story is left open ended. We never find out if the entire family was ever fully reconciled.

## Reflections

Jesus is reminding us that we are all given the ministry of restoring relationships. The older brother could not forgive. He never used the word “Father.” He isolated himself from the world’s most loving parent. In Tim Keller’s book, “The Prodigal God”, he observes that many of us are more like the older brother than the loving dad. He points out that the word “prodigal” refers to wasteful or extravagant behavior. God’s love and forgiveness for all of us (even when we wander) is truly extravagant. This love is not wasteful but true grace.

I’ve often wondered if the “unforgivable sin” against God is really just a play on words. The sin that cannot be forgiven is the sin of un-forgiveness! Jesus frequently shared parables and phrases with double meanings. Jesus was a living parable. He taught us to forgive and his life (and death) brings lasting forgiveness from God.

God calls us into relationships of reconciliation. The Lord’s Prayer states, “forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” One is not possible without the other. We are just as guilty as the older brother if we cannot forgive. Through the ages this parable speaks to us all on many levels: teenage rebellion, inheritance, alienation from family, the appeal of the different, the true cost of foolish living, self-awakening, repentance, homecoming, forgiveness, celebration, sibling rivalry, anger, and broken hearts.

A better title for this parable could be “the Loving Father.” Ultimately, that’s what counts. God created us to be like the parent, not either brother. Our purpose is to embrace God’s acceptance and share it with others. It’s a love that’s certainly shocking. Isn’t that marvelous!

**Strength Finders talent: Focus**

[**https://www.gallup.com/cliftonstrengths/en/252239/focus-theme.aspx**](https://www.gallup.com/cliftonstrengths/en/252239/focus-theme.aspx)

This story conveys a complete reversal. In ancient times, children would never ask a parent for their inheritance. It was like asking your parent to die. It was completely disrespectful. The story begins with someone who lacked direction.

In the pig pen (not kosher for a Jewish son), he came to himself. Suddenly he has focus. This clarity enabled him to chart a new and better direction for his life. Focus enables a healthy person to chart healthy decisions.

The loving parent in this story had complete focus. The father kept a watch out for the wayward son and ran to him. In ancient times, the first person of a village to encounter such a wayward person would have the power to permanently banned them from the village. The loving father ran to protect his son. The loving dad declared it was time for a meal and celebration. Just like we do every time we celebrate the Eucharist (The Great Thanksgiving). Jesus said, “for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” Mathew 26

**Enneagram connections: Nine**

Nines have the capacity to understand points of view of all the types. Nines can be the source of real peace. The blind man discovered this peace which brings a special connection with God. Nines can also be complacent and not like disruptive change as demonstrated by the religious leaders and his parents.

This story appears to follow all nine types of the Enneagram in its classical order: 9,8,7,6,5,4,3,2,1,9 (like journey of Ulysses). It also demonstrates the transformational power of the Enneagram. It helps us see things as they really are. We are enlightened. We see.

It’s interesting to note that this story does appear in the 9th chapter of John. Stephen Langton (c. 1150 – 9 July 1228) was an English Cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church and Archbishop of Canterbury between 1207 and his death in 1228. He was the one who first divided the Bible into chapters and verses to help scholars. He is also credited with writing the Magna Carta which Martin Luther and the delegates at the United States Constitutional Convention celebrated as a landmark document celebrating freedom. Stephen was also associated with the Benedictine order that has Enneagon connections going back to Cappadocia and the early Christian church. Was number this chapter 9 possibly a hidden clue?

[**https://cpenneagram.com/enneagram-type-nine**](https://cpenneagram.com/enneagram-type-nine)

**The Prodigal in the Key of “F”**

Feeling footloose and frisky, a featherbrained fellow forced his father to

fork over his farthings. Fast he flew to foreign fields and frittered his

family's fortune, feasting fabulously with floozies and faithless friends.

Flooded with flattery he financed a full-fledged fling of "funny foam" and

fast food.

Fleeced by his fellows in folly, facing famine, and feeling faintly fuzzy, he

found himself a feed-flinger in a filthy foreign farmyard. Feeling frail and

fairly famished, he fain would have filled his frame with foraged food from

the fodder fragments.

"Fooey," he figured, "my father's flunkies fare far fancier," the frazzled

fugitive fumed feverishly, facing the facts. Finally, frustrated from

failure and filled with foreboding (but following his feelings) he fled from

the filthy foreign farmyard.

Faraway, the father focused on the fretful familiar form in the field and

flew to him and fondly flung his forearms around the fatigued fugitive.

Falling at his father's feet, the fugitive floundered forlornly, "Father, I

have flunked and fruitlessly forfeited family favor."

Finally, the faithful Father, forbidding and forestalling further flinching,

frantically flagged the flunkies to fetch forth the finest fatling and fix a

feast.

Faithfully, the father's first-born was in a fertile field fixing fences

while father and fugitive were feeling festive. The foreman felt fantastic

as he flashed the fortunate news of a familiar family face that had forsaken

fatal foolishness. Forty-four feet from the farmhouse the first-born found a

farmhand fixing a fatling.

Frowning and finding fault, he found father and fumed, "Floozies and foam

from frittered family funds and you fix a feast following the fugitive's

folderol?" The first-born's fury flashed, but fussing was futile. The frugal

first-born felt it was fitting to feel "favored" for his faithfulness and

fidelity to family, father, and farm. In foolhardy fashion, he faulted the

father for failing to furnish a fatling and feast for his friends. His folly

was not in feeling fit for feast and fatling for friends; rather his flaw was

in his feeling about the fairness of the festival for the found fugitive.

His fundamental fallacy was a fixation on favoritism, not forgiveness. Any

focus on feeling "favored" will fester and friction will force the faded

facade to fall. Frankly, the father felt the frigid first-born's frugality

of forgiveness was formidable and frightful. But the father's former

faithful fortitude and fearless forbearance to forgive both fugitive and

first-born flourishes.

The farsighted father figured, "Such fidelity is fine, but what forbids

fervent festivity for the fugitive that is found? Unfurl the flags and

finery, let fun and frolic freely flow. Former failure is forgotten, folly is

forsaken. Forgiveness forms the foundation for future fortune."

Four facets of the father's fathomless fondness for faltering fugitives are:

 1) Forgiveness

 2) Forever faithful friendship

 3) Fadeless love, and

 4) A facility for forgetting flaws.

Questions

1. Baptist minister Robert Lowry composed hymns of hope in the midst of great personal struggle (he also wrote “Shall we Gather at the River”). What do these verses say about the love of God?

Where is my wandering boy tonight—The boy of my tenderest care,

The boy that was once my joy and light, the child of my love and prayer?

Go for my wandering boy tonight; Go search for him where you will;

But bring him to me with all his blight, and tell him I love him still. (1877)

1. Who do you identify with in this parable? Have you ever felt like the older brother? The young brother? The father?
2. When is your church like the loving father or the older brother?

*With riches and youth to squander*

*The pleasure-bent 'Prodigal Son'*

*Left the house of his father*

*In search of adventure and fun.*

*And in reckless and riotous living*

*He wasted his youth and his gold,*

*And stripped of his earthly possessions*

*He was hungry friendless and cold.*

*And thus he returned to his father*

*Who met him with arms open wide*

*And cried, "my son, you are welcome*

*And a banquet awaits you inside.”*

*Now this story is told to remind us*

*Not so much of the wandering son*

*But the unchanging love of the father*

*Who gladly forgave all he'd done*

*And the message contained in this story*

*Is a powerful, wonderful one,*

*For it shows our Father in heaven*

# Waits to welcome each prodigal son

Helen Steiner Rice, 1994