

“Two Sons Full of Pride and God’s Forgiving Love in Jesus”

Luke 15:11-32

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In the Gospel reading today we have the parable of the prodigal son. It actually involves two sons, and both were bad, though in different ways. The spiritual issue here is sinful pride. The parable also exhibits God’s forgiving love.

Jesus gave this parable in a context. It starts at the beginning of Luke chapter 15. It says there that “the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear [Jesus].” The Pharisees and the scribes complained about this and criticized Jesus, saying, ‘This man receives sinners and eats with them’” (Luke 15:1-2 ESV).

Jesus immediately responded with the parable of the lost sheep. The shepherd leaves the 99 sheep in the wilderness in order to find the one sheep that has gone lost. Then Jesus says that when the shepherd has found the one lost sheep, he calls together his friends and neighbors to a feast of celebration: “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost” (Luke 15:3-6). Then Jesus said, “Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (Luke 15:7 ESV).

Then Jesus spoke the parable of the prodigal son to illustrate (Luke 15:11-32). The one person who repents is like the prodigal son. The righteous persons who need no repentance are like the older son. The father represents God, or more accurately God as revealed in Jesus.

The younger son comes to his father and asks to be given his share of the inheritance of the estate. Now are you thinking with Me? “Hey, wait a minute. The father is still alive and in good health. How can it be that the son asks for his share of the inheritance?” Children who inherit from their parents don’t do so until their parents die. It seems like the son was wishing his father were dead.

This puzzles commentators. They think that this sort of thing was not really possible in the culture of Jesus’ day. This father could not have divided up his estate because he was still alive. On the other hand, it seems odd that the father could not have given his son a cash equivalent or equivalent property, like camels, or sheep, or cattle. Why not, especially if the father had some means?

But Jesus’ point here is not to accurately reflect the mores and laws regarding inheritance and distribution of family property. The point is that the younger son makes a rather outrageous, rebellious, and lawless request of his father. His request goes against what would have been accepted law and morality. It was lawless. That’s the point. That’s all we really need to get. We could translate the lawlessness of the younger son’s request into what would be regarded as lawless in any cultural setting, and especially in relation to God as creator and the giver of the Ten Commandments.

The father’s response was even more remarkable and even more shocking. The father granted the request. Why didn’t the father in the parable do what everyone in Jesus’ day would have expected: give the son a harsh rejection of the request and most likely quite harsh and severe punishment to go along with it. Why does the father seem to give in to such bald-faced and bold lawlessness and rebellion rather than quashing it with severity and force? We might want to say, maybe scream: Does not the father know that by not quashing it, he is suggesting that the son has the freedom to do it? Is God endorsing such freedom which is really just a guise

for lawlessness and rebellion?

By the way, keep in mind that this parable is about the kingdom of God, not the civil realm in human society. There are offices in the civil realm that God has instituted that have the responsibility to restrain lawlessness, particularly where injury to others would be involved. In Jesus' parable, there does not seem to be a threat of immediate injury to anyone else.

Still, Jesus touches on deep issues that have to do with God in relation to evil. Here Jesus hints that God, in some respects allows human beings to find out the hard way, by experience; to reap the consequences of what they sow (Gal. 6:7). Hopefully, that makes us learn humility and repentance. Those who refuse to be humbled by even these lessons of life will not return home and will not find the truth.

Ironically, God operates this way precisely because we are humans, not machines. Many then would say here: "Aha, you see, free will." Well, if free will means that we are not machines. Alright. On the other hand, we need to realize that the son's will was not really free because he could not control the consequences. It is better to say that the issue is not so much free will but learning to walk in humility and in God's love, which honors God above all things willingly—that is in a will turned toward and filled with God's love; which does no harm to the neighbor willingly; and also to learn about the corrupted ugliness of our natural, human nature.

In Jesus, God would govern our souls through that forgiving love which receives back, rather than by that force that would prevent us from failing and falling into the wrong. In this way we learn about truth and ourselves from experience in a way that is powerful to convert the soul. This way of learning also comports with being human, though it is more painful than if we had the heart and mind just to listen to God in sincere humility, which is much better.

Anyway, the younger son gathers up his money and belongings and heads off to another country, far away from his father's house. He is in full rejection of his father. He is truly dead. He is truly lost.

He throws away all his money and property on reckless living (Luke 15:13). Let's say it like this: he parties all night and sleeps all day. He engages full throttle in the wild life. He throws off all responsibility and restraint. Responsibility, truth, and restraint are for squares; for people who don't really like freedom. They are for people who have no fun, for those who don't really know how to enjoy life.

There is law in God's universe that is not necessarily spoken law; I'm not talking about gravity. It is a law that is a sort of silent operation of God's omnipotent rule over human beings. This law was in operation. Jesus knows this will happen. So he has the father give the son his share of the family estate so that the son could experience this law. The son was in no state of heart and mind to listen to and obey verbal instruction. But the unspoken law that is built-in to God's universe because God rules was in operation and brought the son to his knees.

The son ran into this law in this way. If you spend your money by partying all night and sleeping all day, doing what is irresponsible, contrary to God's will, to satisfy your impulses and your lust for fun and pleasure, you will end up without any money, all alone, with no friends, and quite literally looking for food and a place to lay your head. This law too can work repentance, change of heart and mind. The son begins to think: it sure would be better to work out some arrangement with my father than to be so hungry that I desire to eat pigs-feed, though no one will even give me that (Luke 15:17-19).

The son's pride is crumbling. This is the real heart of repentance, the crumbling of pride. In the crumbling of pride, he works out his speech, his confession: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your

hired servants” (Luke 15:18-19 ESV).

He gets up and returns home. His father sees him from far off. He runs to meet him. The son begins his speech, which is good and true and necessary (Luke 15:20-21). But he is not received back into sonship until the father calls for the robe and the ring and the shoes for his feet (Luke 15:22). Repentance is necessary, otherwise there would not have been any son there for the father to receive back in forgiving love. Yet, it is the father’s actions of forgiving love that restore this lost son to sonship. Being restored depends entirely on the father’s forgiving love; it is there in abundance.

Now there is cause for celebration. This is the joy in heaven over one sinner who repents. Let the feast begin, for this son was dead, but now lives again; he was lost but now is found (Luke 15:24).

The point is: in Jesus, there is complete forgiveness from God for the repentant prodigal who returns home confessing: “I have sinned against God. I am no longer worthy to be called a son, or daughter.” This is what the scribes and Pharisees as people who regarded themselves as righteous did not understand about Jesus and the tax-collectors and sinners.

This is exhibited by the older son. He comes in from working in the fields. He hears the music from the celebration. What’s going on?, he asks. A servant tells him that the father has thrown a feast for his younger brother who has come home (Luke 15:25-27).

The older son is furious. His father has received back his younger brother who insulted his father by demanding his share of the inheritance and then went off and squandered that money on wild living. So the older son refuses to go in to the feast (Luke 15:28).

Jesus tells us what the older son is thinking in a prideful, poisoned heart: “I have always done what you commanded. I have served you as a slave. You have never even given me a little goat so I could feast with my friends. But you have slaughtered the choice steer for this son of yours who squandered your money with prostitutes” (Luke 15:29-30).

By the way, it is a slanderous assumption on the part of this older brother that the younger brother actually spent money on prostitutes. Jesus does not actually say that that is what the younger son did. And even if he did, why did the older brother have to think the worst? This older son is running afoul of the 8th commandment.

This son’s heart is far from his father’s heart. This son deeply insults his father by not going in to the feast. He questions the judgment and authority of his father, and actually places himself above it. So it was with the scribes and pharisees in relation to Jesus. So it is with anyone who judges God’s acceptance of the repentant sinner in grace; who judges God’s forgiving acceptance on the basis of their own purported obedience to the law. Here is an ugly sin that makes one a prodigal: my obedience and goodness and merit give me the right to judge the penitent sinner and also God, who forgives and receives him or her.

The father also responds to this son with grace-love, hoping to melt the son’s awful pride that was breeding hate. “Son you are always with me. All that is mine is yours. But you don’t seem to understand that it is fitting to celebrate, because your brother was dead, and is alive again; he was lost and is found” (Luke 15:31-32 ESV).

The father does not talk to his older son about celebrating because his brother was dead and was lost. There is no celebration in heaven for that. Rather, the celebration was because the younger son was dead, but is now alive again; was lost and is now found. The older son was missing this point.

So may God work against our pride, the root of all sin, exhibited either in lawlessness or in a self-righteous superiority complex that exhibits itself in slander and hate. May we find God’s

forgiving love in coming home to Him, which love He has abundantly for us. For when we realize our pride either in lawlessness or in prideful self-righteous blindness and come home, Jesus is there to receive us in complete forgiveness and sonship, and bring us into the father's house, into the feast in which all heaven rejoices. Amen.