

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001
www.fcfonline.org

FROM DEATH TO LIFE

Luke 15:1-2, 11-32

By

Steven J. Cole

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April 12, 2009
Special Easter Message

From Death to Life
Luke 15:1-2, 11-32

You may wonder what the parable of the prodigal son has to do with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which is the normal subject for an Easter message. I grant that you will not find Jesus Christ, His death, or His resurrection in the story. It is there implicitly, because the story of the prodigal son (which, as Tim Keller and others have pointed out, should really be called “the prodigal *sons*” or “the prodigal God”) is about the essence of true Christianity. And true Christianity rests on the substitutionary death and bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:1-19). We can only be reconciled to the Father through Him (John 14:6).

But in this short parable, Jesus does not go into many of the theological aspects of salvation. This does not mean that these truths are not essential. Rather, Jesus was making one main point and so He does not cover the gamut of theology here. That point is that *God joyously welcomes repentant sinners into His presence.*

What drew me to this well-known parable as our text for this Easter Sunday is the sentence that the father of the prodigal repeats twice. He first states it as his reason for throwing a party (15:24), “for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.” Then he repeats it in his plea to the older brother to come in to the celebration (15:32), “But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.” So it’s a story of great joy because a sinner has been changed from death to life. And as we know (even though it’s not explicitly in this story), such a change in any person is only possible because Jesus Christ died for our sins and was raised again to life.

The chapter begins by noting that many tax collectors (notorious scoundrels) and sinners were listening to Jesus, but the scribes and Pharisees were grumbling (Luke 15:2), “This man receives sinners and eats with them.” Jesus responds to their accusation by telling three stories. The first two are about a shepherd who finds his lost sheep and about a woman who finds a lost, valuable

coin. In both stories, the lesson is the same, that there is great joy in heaven over one sinner who repents (15:7, 10).

Then Jesus tells the story of the lost son, which really is about two lost sons. When the first lost son returns home again, we again see the theme of great joy because this lost son has been found. But then Jesus concludes with the angry response of the older brother to the father's joy. By doing so, Jesus skillfully confronts His critics, the Pharisees, by painting them into the picture and leaving them to consider the question: "Will you rejoice as God does when a dead sinner is brought to life, or will you remain alienated from the Father as you now are?"

THE STORY IN ITS CULTURAL SETTING:

Before we draw some lessons, we need to understand the dynamics of the story in its cultural setting. (I'm relying here on many of the insights of Dr. Kenneth Bailey, who lived for many years in the Middle East and studied this parable from the perspective of Middle Eastern culture [on "Expositapes # 2," from Denver Seminary, no date]. Also, I'm drawing from Tim Keller's *The Prodigal God* [Dutton], who also acknowledges his debt to Dr. Bailey.)

The parable begins with what Jesus' audience would have considered a shocking incident: a young man asks his father to give him his share of the family estate. In that culture, when the father died the oldest son would have received two-thirds of the family estate and other heirs would have gotten one-third (Deut. 21:17). Sometimes a father might voluntarily divide up his property to his sons before his death. But it was *unthinkable* for a son to ask his still-healthy father to give him his share of the inheritance! It was an act of great disrespect towards the father. In essence, the boy was saying, "I don't care about you and I don't want anything further to do with you. You might as well be dead as far as I'm concerned. I just want your money!"

Also, in that culture the inheritance would consist primarily of the family land, handed down from generation to generation. It normally would have been sold only under dire financial straits, and then to a kinsman. But to sell the family property, take the proceeds and move out of the Promised Land to a distant Gentile country was shocking. People in the village would have wondered,

“What’s going on in that family for this boy to do such a terrible thing?” It would have shamed the father and it would have made the boy a social outcast should he ever return.

And so the father’s response would have shocked Jesus’ audience. Normally, a Middle Eastern father would have slapped such an impudent son in the face. Then he would have driven the son out of the family and disinherited him. But the father didn’t do that. He simply complied by dividing his wealth between his sons. Without anger, the father endures this terrible humiliation and the pain of a son who rejects his love and wants to get as far away from him as possible.

Next, the younger son takes the money from selling the land (to sell it quickly, he probably only got a pittance of what it was worth), moves to a distant country, and squanders everything with loose living. Jesus does not stipulate whether such loose living involved prostitutes. That is the angry accusation of the older brother (15:30) and it may have been true. But we don’t know for sure.

Then two things happen: due to his own stupidity, the boy runs out of money. And due to God’s providence, a severe famine hits the country where he is living. But he is not yet low enough to return to his father and admit his mistakes. Rather, he attaches himself to a citizen of that country and is assigned what would be the worst job in the world for a Jew, to feed the pigs. The young man became so hungry that he was tempted to eat the carob pods that he was feeding to the pigs. He now hits the bottom!

Hard times have a way of making a man think more clearly! So the young man comes to his senses. He thinks about his father’s hired men. They all have more than enough bread, but here he is, dying of hunger (15:17). So he comes up with a plan. He recognizes that he has sinned against God (“heaven” is a figure of speech for God) and against his father. So, he determines to go to his father, confess his sin, and ask his father to make him as one of his hired men. Perhaps he is thinking that this arrangement would allow him someday to pay back the money that he had squandered so that the family could recover the sold land.

So, he gets up and heads for home. The young man would have been humiliated to show his face in the village, but he goes

anyway. The father sees the boy coming from a long ways off. This can only mean that many times each day the father scanned the road to see if his wayward son might be coming home. When he saw his son, the father felt deep compassion for him. This caused him to do something else that would have been shocking to Jesus' audience: he *ran* to the boy! In that culture, patriarchs did *not* run. It was undignified. To run, you had to pull up your ground-length robe and expose your bare legs, which was disgraceful. Boys might run and young men might run, but older men did not run. But this father throws aside his dignity and runs to his son.

When he gets to him, the father ignores the son's stench, falls on his neck and tenderly kisses him. This would have been completely unexpected and shocking. In that culture, a wayward son might have been grudgingly permitted to come back into the village, but he would have been humiliated and scorned. The father would have been unavailable or distant and aloof. When David allowed his murderous son Absalom to return, he refused see him for two years (2 Sam. 14:24, 28). Then, when the boy did see his father, he would be made to grovel. The father coldly would have set forth the demands that the boy would have to fulfill to earn his restoration to the family. There would not be any show of affection. But this father hugs and kisses his son.

The son begins his rehearsed statement of confession, but he leaves off the part about becoming one of his father's hired men. I think that he was interrupted by his father's commands to the servants to bring the robe, the ring, and the sandals.

The father tells the servants (15:22-23), "Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate." The best robe would have been the father's own robe, worn only on the most important occasions. The robe, the ring, and the sandals all showed that the boy was being welcomed back, not as a hired hand or as a disgraced son who now needed to earn his way back into the family. He is welcomed back with full acceptance. He stumbled home barefoot and smelling like the pigsty, but the father effusively welcomes him in an outburst of undeserved, unexpected, joyous love. Then he kills the fattened calf, hires a band, calls in the whole village, and throws a party! What a scene!

If Jesus had ended the story here, His pharisaic audience would have shrugged it off. This story went against not only many of their cultural standards, but also against their religious ideas. No self-respecting earthly father would have done what this father did. And surely, God is not like this, is He? God doesn't welcome filthy sinners into His holy presence, does He? He accepts those that keep His commandments, but He has nothing to do with sinners! We have to earn God's favor, don't we?

But Jesus doesn't end the story there. He concludes by telling us about the *other* lost son, the older brother. He comes in from the field and as he approaches the house, he hears music and dancing. Rather than going in to check it out for himself—he may have feared that this would happen—he calls one of the servant boys and asks him what's going on. When he explains the situation, the older brother is incensed and refuses to go in. The culturally proper thing would have been for him to go in, scowl at his no-good brother, and by his dour countenance show everyone how much he disapproved of the party. Later, in private, he could have confronted his father.

But instead, he humiliates his father in front of all the guests by refusing to go in to the party. Again, the father does something unexpected: he goes out and tenderly pleads with his older son, showing the father's love for this son as well. But the older son is just plain rude. Rather than respectfully addressing him as "father," he says (15:29), "Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends." This is a shocking outburst. He's saying, "Look, you owe me big time! I've never done anything to wrong you and yet you haven't even given me a goat, much less a fatted calf, so that I could have a party with my friends." He's accusing his father of being unfair. He's insulting his father of being prodigal (extravagant) by spending his wealth on this no-good son of his (he won't call him his *brother*!).

The father responds with gentleness to this rude assault on his honor. He says (15:31), "Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours." He has always had access to the father's goods, but he has been so distant from the father that he has never

utilized these abundant resources. The older brother's self-righteousness and anger have prevented him from experiencing the father's abundant bounty and from the joy of welcoming back his repentant brother. All he can do is sit outside and sulk and miss the party. The father ends with this appeal (15:32), "But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours [not, "my son"!] was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found."

We could draw many lessons from this profound parable, but I want to zero in on just one. Maybe it will shock you!

True Christianity is essentially not a matter of moralism, but rather of being alive to the Father.

I can only hit some highlights:

1. Both sons were dead to their father, but only one came to realize it.

There are two ways to be dead or lost or alienated from the Father. One way is to be like the younger brother—to walk away from the Father's love and move to a distant country.

- A. The younger son was dead to the father through open rebellion and loose living.

He rejected the father's values. He wanted freedom to explore other ways to live. He was tired of the narrow-minded religious mores. He felt restricted by the family's religious heritage. In modern terms, he didn't like going to church every Sunday and missing out on all the fun that he could have partying with the world. So by his open rebellion and loose living, he cut himself off from this incredibly kind, gracious, loving father. But,

- B. The older son was dead to the father through self-righteous moralism and using the father for his own selfish purposes.

You'll miss the point of the story if you do not see that there are *two dead sons*, in terms of their relationship to their father. This "good" son at home didn't love the father any more than the prodigal son did while he was in the distant country. He was lost precisely because of his own "goodness." He was proud of the fact that he always did his duty. His pride made him feel that the father owed him something. He had rights that he had earned and if the

father didn't give him those rights, then he had a right to be angry! And, he didn't cherish the love of the father. He just wanted to use the father to get what he wanted, his own party with his own friends and his own inheritance. He didn't care about his father.

But true Christianity is not a matter of using God to get what you want, but rather of loving God because of who He is. True Christianity is not a matter of being an unhappy, dutiful son, but rather of joyfully receiving and enjoying the undeserved love and extravagant bounty of the Father. True Christianity is not at its heart a matter of moralism, but of being alive toward God, in a close loving relationship with Him, experiencing the joy of His grace. But how do you become alive to the Father?

2. To become alive to the Father, you must come to see your own desperate need for His extravagant love and grace, turn from your sin, and return to the Father.

The younger son finally, in his degraded condition in the pigsty, came to see his need for his father. He realized that because his father was a kind and generous man, even the hired men had it better than he did. And so, recognizing his need and his father's goodness, he left the distant country and his rebellious way of life and returned to the father. He left his so-called "friends." He left his attempt to make it on his own in the distant country. He left his loose ways. He returned to the only one who could help him—his gracious father.

The younger son did not make up excuses for the terrible things that he had done. He didn't blame the father for being too strict or blame his religious upbringing. He didn't blame his legalistic older brother, even though the older brother may have been one reason he took off. Rather, he openly confessed that he had sinned against God and against his father. And, he returned to his father just as he was.

The older brother, however, was blind to his alienation from the father. He didn't see his need for his father's extravagant love. He didn't need his grace because he felt that he had earned his place in life. He was a dutiful son! The father owed him a few things! His unawareness of his sin caused him not to see his need for the father's grace. "Just give me what I deserve!"

Many who grow up in the church are like the younger brother. They reject their godly upbringing and wallow in our immoral culture, trying to find happiness in sin. But there are also many like the older brother. They keep the rules, but they don't love the Father. They don't enjoy His grace. They don't know His joy.

How can you tell if you're an older brother? Are you angry with God? Do you feel that He is unfair towards you? Are you proud of your dutiful obedience? Do you think that God has not treated you as well as you really deserve? Do you despise and want nothing to do with those who are down and out because of their sin? Do you want God to judge them? If you see yourself in any of these questions, you may be an older brother! Like the lukewarm church of Laodicea, you need to see your true condition, that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked (Rev. 3:17). Also, you need to see what happens when you see your need and return to the Father:

3. When you see your need and return to the Father, He welcomes you with joyous acceptance.

True joy is not found in the distant country, partying with your worldly friends. True joy is not found slaving in the fields for God, while you're angry and bitter because you think that He doesn't treat you rightly. True joy is found when you see how selfish and proud and sinful you have been and you return to the Father in true repentance and brokenness. He joyously welcomes every repentant sinner to His banquet table!

It cost the Father dearly to provide the way of reconciliation for alienated sinners. Just as the father of the two sons bore humiliation and shame to be reconciled with them, so the heavenly Father sent His Son to bear the shame our sins on the cross. Just as the father of the two sons freely gave of his wealth, so the heavenly Father gave the most costly gift, His own Son. As you grow in your awareness of how much it cost the Father to welcome you into the family, it will not make you want to move to the distant country and live apart from the Father. It will not make you want to stay outside the party and sulk about how mistreated you've been. You'll want to obey the Father joyously because of His abundant kindness towards you. But the motive for your obedience is not duty. It is the delight of being alive toward God.

Conclusion

If you were to ask people on the street what it means to be a Christian, most of them would say that it means believing in Jesus, going to church, and trying to be a good person. They view heaven as a reward that you earn. But they just described the joyless older brother! They have no concept of Christianity as a joyous relationship with a kind, gracious, and accepting Father, who at great cost sent His own Son to pay the penalty for our sins. They have no experience of the joy of knowing the risen Savior. They don't realize that true Christianity is not essentially a matter of moralism, but rather of being alive to God in Christ.

You are either dead towards the Father or alive towards him. You may be a dutiful, moral church member, but you're angry at God and alienated from Him. You're either in the party with the Father or outside without Him. There's no in between. Jesus ends the story without giving the response of the elder brother. It's an open invitation to all religious older brothers who are proud of their morality, but alienated from the Father. Respond now to the Father's costly, extravagant love and come in to the party!

Application Questions

1. Did the older brother have a right to be angry with the father? Wasn't the father's treatment of the younger brother unfair to the older brother?
2. Does your past look more like that of the younger or older brother? What dangers does this alert you to?
3. How can an older brother grow to appreciate God's grace? How can a younger brother avoid abusing it?
4. Is there a danger in over-emphasizing God's lavish grace? Why does a proper understanding of grace lead to obedience?

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