

This parable of Jesus is only found in the gospel of Luke. It was delivered in the context of the Pharisees and scribes criticising Jesus because he consorted with publicans and sinners. It is a reminder to all that the power of a father's love can overcome great barriers which otherwise would cause separation between those parties who place material consequences above relationships.

Prodigal means wasteful or exorbitant. It is a derogatory term which is illustrative of someone who squanders what they have not appreciating the value of what they had in their possession. Many can be prodigal and foolish in how they approach life. The lessons which life can teach are many and varied. The way that Jesus painted the word picture of this selfish indulgent arrogant pleasure server and the possibility of such being transformed into a repentant respectful, thoughtful, humble contrite individual should give pause for thought that Jesus believed that anyone could turn themselves around even from the brink of disaster.

Jesus is never the prodigal nor the piqued elder son who does not understand how an old man can forgive the devastation that the younger sibling produced. We can all be like that. He however shows his humanity by being able to provide such teaching through the parable. He was inspired to do so by the Holy Spirit, but God always chooses a suitable vessel to deliver any particular message. The sinless Son can speak authoritatively on such matters because he had that shared experience of grafting as a craftsman working hard to provide for the family after his stepfather passed away. Joseph disappears from the divine record, after the family returned from Egypt. He did sire at least six other children with Mary as Jesus named four brothers and also mentioned sisters in the plural, so there were at least two female siblings.

Is Jesus saying that any material waste does not matter? That it is irrelevant to consider the misuse of money when considering spiritual things? No, he is not. The parable makes it clear that at least part of the regret that the prodigal had, was the acknowledgement that he had sinned against God and that it concerned his father, *"I will arise and go to my father and say unto him - I have sinned against heaven and before thee."* All sin is against God and that awareness is necessary before repentance is possible. If we do not accept that we have offended God, we cannot begin to put that fracture right. We should publicly confess the transgression, not seek to hide away and deny such!

The narrative of the parable is set out by Jesus in some detail. When considering a parable, we should remember the template that he gave in the parable of the Sower. The parable is a long one, the story could have been condensed into a shorter form, but the Lord Jesus explained the story over many verses it is one of the longer parables.

The father is described as *"a certain man"*. He seems unusual because when his younger son requested him to divide the inheritance he would get early, before the old man died, he did so. The average father would not do this. To divide the family living between his two sons would mean that he would forsake the responsibility of feeding himself and delegate that to them. However, the story later goes on to state that the father still retained control over the goats and the fatten calf, so he actually only gave the younger son his portion, the elder son still lived under his commandment, see v29.

This unfair division might have actually caused the problems that then followed. Giving such financial freedom to an immature and careless individual could be said to have provoked the dreaded response which almost inevitably followed on from this decision. Whilst few men would take such action, there is a way in which we can attribute this to God, the Father. Many regard God with the disdain we might have with a human father who acted in this way, but with God there is a difference. He alone knows the end from the beginning. He knew that the prodigal would repent but no earthly person could have done so. Only by knowing this, is it possible that we might have the justification to divest responsibility onto the foolish younger son.

God knows His children and He provides the necessary experiences that will have the desired result in them. He knows who will respond and who have become so entrenched in their sin that they cannot extract themselves from it, nor do they want to do that! The raising up of a mighty famine is a human tragedy for almost all, but not everyone. For the prodigal that famine was a Godsend which had the power to give him pause when he most needed it and be thrust back upon the mercy of his family. We are all the children of God, whether we behave like that or not. We are made in His image and have the potential to be like Him, if we choose to respond to His prompts and indications, which are often not seen because they are not looked for. The way that God's gift to His wayward children has been so severely squandered in a very prodigal way stands comparison. He is heavily criticised for permitting the waste and debauchery which results from this exercising of free will. However, like the father in the parable, he is looking for the return of the wayward son whom he loved despite the foolish actions of that child. Was the child free to return to do the same all over again? No, he is not. He had received his share of the inheritance and in humility was now a changed man. He expected to be treated as one of the hired servants. He knew that he deserved no better. However, the repentant do not receive what they deserve but what God in His grace will bestow upon them as he sees fit and which is His sole prerogative. The elder son was not consulted by the father when the fatted calf was killed. Such joy cannot be adequately expressed by committee!

To the Jew the aspect of eating the husks of the swine is an illustration of the depths of uncleanness in extreme and dire circumstance. This stands in contrast to the riotous living in which the foolish man indulged himself. It might seem that it was impossible for such to be redeemed but we cannot say who will be humbled under God's mighty Hand.

The parable is clear that the son whilst still indulging himself in his waywardness that he was dead. It was only when he repented that he returned to life – *“he was alive AGAIN”*. Unrepentant sinners are dead to the father. They can return to life, but they are not alive whilst outside the family confines and separated by unacceptable behaviour.

The elder son was angry. He had not been included in the decision and was aggrieved by the favouritism that the father showed the returnee. This is a rational response and in keeping with human experience. This surprise was unacceptable. He had no idea that his prodigal brother would ever return. He did not live in hope of him doing so, unlike the father who was looking out for him to return and saw him *“when he was yet a great way off”*. This is the action of an unusual father, like The Father Himself does for us. This is the more typical reaction of the nominal faithful who can become upset with the forgiveness extended to the more foolish. The Jews would have been like this with

regard to the gentiles. They had forsaken the care of the father to the respectful elder son who remained under his commandment and had toiled in the heat of the day to provide food and other blessings for the wider family. They resented the return of the gentile into the divine fold. Not all Jews are angry many of the earlier believers were Jewish, but many were gentiles. The Jew has an advantage which he obtained from the continual association in the things of the father.

That the father came out to entreat with him in his anger shows the care which the old man had for his sons. This elder son also needed to be challenged by the same circumstances. He was not taken into the close counsel of the father but had continued to maintain his integrity. God is not finished with the Jews despite what people say. He will have just as much patience with the elder as he had with the younger hoping that he will see the error of his ways and come round to returning in full spirit with all members of the family.

The other son knew something of the sins of the prodigal. He accused him to his father, but not to his face of having – “*devoured thy living with harlots*”. We can easily write off someone for the “obvious” sins which they commit which are open to all to see, but no one knew the sins of the elder which are left unstated but nevertheless would have existed as all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. All except Jesus Christ who did no sin neither was guile found in his mouth.

There will be music and dancing when the prodigal returns. This was certainly the case when the gentiles were grafted back into the good olive tree. The New Testament recalls the celebration. There is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents more than ninety and nine who need no repentance. We should be willing to enter into the joy of the repentant even when we feel that they do not deserve the special treatment, but God knows the human spirit as does Jesus also. Both of them do rejoice greatly and would begrudge such happiness. Afterwards the prodigal son would return to the mundane but in the love of his father whom he must now treat with more appropriate respect than before.

It is often remarked what did the elder son do when his father confronted him with his paternal appeal to accept the basic element of forgiveness of the wayward son, despite all his past mistakes. However, we are not told what his response was. That we are all challenged when we are asked to treat the prodigal with compassion shows an inability to see him in ourselves. Do we really think we have none of his traits in us? Do we not sometimes stray from the logical and forthright service to our God by letting the god ME back into our conscious attention? Have we never been wasteful of the many gifts which God Himself has granted us. Are we always the diligent dutiful son who never asks anything of the Father?