

The Story of a Broken Family¹

By Dr. Dave Neale

Behind the Text

So, as most of us know perfectly well, our family is the greatest blessing in life, but also the source of the greatest pain when relationships are broken.²

Our passage today is the magnificent Parable of the Lost Son, as some call it, or the Prodigal Son, meaning the “recklessly wasteful” fellow of our story.³ When some people come to complain to Jesus about the questionable company he is keeping (tax collectors and sinners), presumably because they think He is acting in recklessly wasteful way by the company He keeps, He tells them a story about two sons, *the story about a broken family*.

Maybe he tells a story about a family because it’s so easy to judge other people, but when it’s your family you can’t dismiss them as sinners quite so easily. You have to deal with it. You have to own it.

In the Text

The characters are thus:

- There is the young man who demanded his inheritance and lost it all in loose living abroad. We see his human weakness and eventual humiliation; we see his penance, and driven by a desperate will to survive he returns home.
- The model son who bore all the responsibilities of the house of his father, and whose understandable sense of righteous entitlement alienates him from both his brother and his father; because of his bitterness and resentment he cannot find it in his heart to welcome his prodigal brother back.
- And, of course, the father who displays an almost incomprehensible willingness to take his wayward son back into the family, violating all the norms of justice and common sense.

This son, he has no name, breaks his father’s heart in the most egregious way that can be imagined; Jesus portrays the deepest possible betrayal of this most intimate of all bonds in life.

Here are two aspects of the son’s betrayal. Let’s call them **property** and **procreation**. We look at this in order to understand the depth of his father’s grace toward him when he finally returns.

- Property. The House of the Father was the basic unit of society, the family. It was the sacred responsibility of everyone in the family to protect it. It was usually comprised of 50-100 people. *Bet ‘Av*. Remember the 5th commandment: honor thy father and thy mother. Family is the primary fabric of society in the biblical story. It was everyone’s sacred responsibility to protect the *property* of the House of the Father. The land was never to be sold, if any debts were secured by the land it had to be redeemed, and in the sabbatical year, every 50th year all land was returned to... the House of the Father. If a man died his brother had to marry his widow to prevent her marrying outside of the clan and taking her husband’s property with him. All of the ancillary laws of Jewish jurisprudence upheld this idea, and NT Wright says that there is no instance in the whole of the OT of an Israelite selling land out of the family – and I add, ‘until now.’

- ***The younger of them said to his father, ‘...give me the share of the property that will belong to me... and he traveled to a distant country and there he squandered his property in dissolute living.*** (v 12, Thus he violates the fundamental social principle of Jewish life)
- Procreation. The older son complains upon his brother’s return... ***this son of yours has devoured your property with prostitutes...*** (v 30) The importance of keeping property in the family is why intermarriage was forbidden (throughout the OT). And this son is off in another country, giving away the rights of the clan’s property to a bunch of prostitutes.

I just don’t see how Jesus could have painted a more egregious betrayal of all that is sacred in the father’s house.

But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe – the best one – and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals feet. And get fatted calf and kill it, let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.(vv 22-23)

From the Text

In terms of application, I believe the father of the boy represents, I believe, God’s love for all of his children.

I said earlier that we are seeing Jesus’ heart here.

Here is, what to me, the central idea of this story. ***The father is a type for God.*** Jesus tells us the story of a broken family, basically, to indicate to us the nature of ***God’s*** merciful posture toward us across time.

Can I just share how this has played out in my life.

- When I first came to the Lord I was trying to explain to my mom, a good Presbyterian, how my life had been changed (driving down the road with her in my red 1967 VW bug) I said, ‘Mom, I know He will never leave me.’ 50 years ago. I just knew it.
- I went to seminary in our second year of marriage, because I thought I ought to look into becoming a minister. We were told in seminary to take the Pastoral Duties in the 3rd year, not before. So I took it in my first year. We went home after the first year because I decided I didn’t want to be a pastor. And so isn’t this an irony that I’m here with you today. What does that tell us about the purpose of God in our lives?
- Eventually, I decided to return to school so I could become a professor. To do that I sold Yellow Pages advertising for 4 years (to save up for 5-6 years of education I needed). My prodigal moment, my pigpen moment, came in a hotel room somewhere as I was travelling half the year to do my job. I knelt and prayed, ‘God, if you can redeem my life, you can save anybody.’ I don’t remember how it happened, but over the months and years what I said to my mom proved to be unfaithfully true, ‘He will never leave me.’

[Musicians]

I don’t know that you can anything more profound than that. If you are open to the idea that the arms of God are open to us not just in this moment as a defining notion of our entire lives – across all time.

We should allow your souls to reside in this idea...

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It is as real to the Christian believer as gravity. Do you know the *shevasana* pose in yoga? You lay down on your back motionless, and feel gravity. Some say it is the most challenging pose of all (asana).

The point of the story is this. We can all find our way back into the arms of a loving God.⁴ This story of a broken family is really the story of a redeemed family.

Benediction

And now, in the words of the 32 Psalm, May the God who is a hiding place for you, whose arms of love are eternally extended to you, preserve you from trouble and surround with glad cries of deliverance. Selah. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

¹ And the Parables of the Lost Son is commonly agreed to be the most significant of Jesus' parables. Entire books written about it, about parts of it. I won't even try to do it any sort of justice this morning. He says, " Bernard Brandon Scott has written the most comprehensive book on the parables in recent years (*Hear Then the Parable*, 1989) says the parable "exceeds the grasp of any interpretation" (108).

² Jesus had a lot to say about family – much of it quite contentious actually. His relationship with his own nuclear family was strained. When his mother and brothers and sisters came to take him home from his itinerant ministry he sent them away, saying his followers were his family (Mark 3:31-35).

The passage in Hebrews resonates on this issue: ***Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God...*** (Heb 2:17). Jesus was in a family and it was difficult.

³ It's the longest parable in the Bible. I don't know of any ancient parallels from which it might have been derived. I think that Jesus wrote this story.

⁴ Timothy Keller wrote a book about Luke 15 and he entitled it *The Prodigal God*. That title challenges our thinking about God. It suggests that this notion that it wasn't the son's reckless behaviour that earned the parable its name. It was the reckless love of the father. And, by extension, Jesus wants us to understand how incomprehensible, how almost irrational God's love is for the children of creation.