

Who is God?

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Jesus concretizes His revelation of the Father's love in the well-known Parable of the Prodigal Son. This Parable may be considered one of Jesus' primary revelations of God the Father's *unconditional* Love.

In the *Parables of Jesus*, Joachim Jeremias identifies Jesus' motive for telling the Prodigal Son Parable (along with the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin Parables). He notes that some of Jesus' detractors were accusing Him of unjustifiably seeking fellowship with sinners. Jesus justifies His actions by noting that His conduct is completely commensurate with His Father's (*Abba*) who is absolutely concerned for sinners, and is capable of justifying even those who have abandoned and shamed their families, countrymen, the law, the covenant, and God:

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is therefore not primarily a proclamation of the Good News to the poor, but a vindication of the Good News in reply to its critics. Jesus' justification lies in the boundless love of God.¹

Three preliminary considerations should be made before retelling the parable as a first century audience would have understood it. First, Jesus intends that the father in the story be a revelation of the heart of God the Father. The parable would be more aptly named The Parable of the *Father* of the Prodigal Son. Secondly, notice that the younger son has committed just about every sin imaginable according to the mindset of Second Temple Judaism (the religious context in which Jesus was operating), and so he has absolutely no basis or merit for asking the father to receive him back into the household – even as one of the servants. Thirdly, the older son in this story represents the Pharisees and those who are trying to remain righteous according to their understanding of the Jewish law, and so we can see that Jesus has not abandoned them, but he desires to give them everything he has – so long as they come back into the house.

Now we may proceed to a retelling of the parable. A father had two sons, the youngest of whom asked for his share of the inheritance. This would have been viewed as an insult to the father which would have shamed both father and family (because the son is asking not only for the right of possession, but the right of disposal of the property which legally does not occur until the death of the father²). Nevertheless, the father hears the son's request and acquiesces to it. He divides his property and lets his son go. Remember the father in the story is Jesus' revelation of God the Father.

The son chooses to go to a foreign land – probably a Gentile land, indicated by his living on a Gentile farm with pigs. Whether he started there or simply ended there is of little consequence. His actions indicate a disregard for (if not a rejection of) his election and his people, and a further shaming of the family from which he came.

¹ Jeremias 1972, p. 131.

² See Jeremias 1972, p. 128-29.

Then the son adds further insult to injury by spending his father's hard-earned fortune on dissolute living (violations of *Torah*) in the gentile land. This shows the son's callous disregard for (if not rejection of) God's law, God's revelation, and perhaps God Himself. Furthermore, he manifests his callous disregard for his people, the law, and God before the entire Gentile community – bringing shame upon them all.

Just when it seems that the son could not possibly sin any more egregiously, the foreign land finds itself in a famine. The son has little money left, and is constrained to live with the pigs, which were considered to be highly unclean animals. The son incurs defilement not only from working with the pigs but actually living with them! He even longs to eat the food of the pigs which would defile him both inside and outside. This reveals the son's wretched spiritual state, which would have engendered both disgust and revulsion from most members of Jesus' First Century audience.

The son experiences a “quasi-change” of heart, not so much because of what he's done to his family, country, people, election, law, religion, and God, but because of the harshness of his condition (“How many of my father's servants have more than enough to eat...”). He decides to take advantage of what he perceives to be his father's merciful nature by proffering an agreement to accept demotion from son to servant (even though it was the father's right to reject and even disown him altogether). The son then makes his way back home.

The father (who is the God-*Abba* figure in Jesus' Parable) sees him coming while he is still on his way (possibly indicating that the father is looking for him) and is so completely overjoyed that he runs out to meet him (despite the fact that the son has so deeply injured and shamed both him and his family). When he meets his son, he throws his arms around him and kisses him. The kiss is not only an act of affection, but also a sign of forgiveness.³ The son's list of insults, injuries, and sins is incapable of turning the father's heart away from him. The father is almost compelled to show unrestrained affection toward him. The son utters his speech of quasi-repentance/quasi-negotiation: “Just treat me like one of your servants....” Instead, the father tells the servants to get him a robe, which not only takes care of his temporal needs, but is also a mark of high distinction.⁴ He then asks that a ring be put on his hand. Jeremiah indicates that this ring is very likely a signet ring,⁵ having the seal of the family. This would indicate not only belonging to the family, but also the authority of the family (showing the son's readmission to the family in an unqualified way). He then gives him shoes, which again takes care of his obvious temporal need, and inasmuch as they are luxuries, signifies a free man who no longer has to go about barefoot like a servant or slave.⁶ He then kills the fatted calf (reserved only for very special occasions) and holds a feast. This is a further indication of the son's readmission to the family by being received at the festal family table.⁷

Jesus' audience probably felt conflicted (if not angered) by the father's “ridiculously merciful” treatment of his son, because it ignored (and even undermined) the “proper” strictures

³ See Jeremiah 1972, p. 130.

⁴ See Jeremiah 1972, p. 130.

⁵ See Jeremiah 1972, p. 130.

⁶ See Jeremiah 1972, p. 130.

⁷ See Jeremiah 1972, p. 130.

of justice. The father's love/mercy seems to disregard the justice of Torah. This does not deter Jesus, because He is convinced that God the Father treats sinners – even the most egregious sinners – in exactly the same fashion, that is, with a heart of unconditional Love.

Jesus continues the story by turning His attention to the older son who reflects a figure of righteousness according to the old covenant. He has stayed loyal to his father, family, election, country, religion, law, and God. Furthermore, he has been an incredibly hard worker and seems to accept patiently the father's frugality toward him ("You did not so much as kill a kid goat for me"). Most of Jesus' audience probably sympathized with this older son's plight when the father demonstrated his extraordinary generosity to his younger son. By all rights, the father should have either rejected or disowned the younger son, and if not that, he certainly should have accepted the younger son's offer to become a servant – but an unqualified re-admittance to the family appeared to be an injustice (if not a slap in the face) to his loyal son.

The father understands the son's difficulty with his actions and goes outside to literally "plead" with his son – virtually begging him to come back into the house (an almost unthinkable humiliation for a father at that time). He begins by giving his older son all his property, addressing his older son's need for justice: "You have been with me always, and everything I have is yours." Then, he gives him an explanation which did not fall within the mainstream interpretation of the law: mercy must take precedence over justice and love take precedence over the law, for that is the only way that the negativity of sin and evil can be redressed and overcome – "Your brother was lost and is found; he was dead and has come back to life."

This Parable coincides precisely with Jesus' address of God as *Abba*, and "love as the highest commandment," because the only way in which they can make sense together is through the logic of unconditional Love in the heart of an unconditionally loving God.

We may now consider more deeply the four main movements of this Parable because they bring to light Jesus' understanding of God – His Father. The first movement of the Parable is the younger son's heartless and shameful treatment of his father (who represents God the Father). He tells his father that he is as good as dead to him and is only interested in his money. He then proceeds to the land of the Gentiles, rejecting his people and election – further dishonoring his father and family. Jesus keeps building up the younger son's deficits to make sure that the audience knows that the younger son's heartlessness and dishonor have reached the ultimate level and that there is almost nothing objectively redeeming about him. So he says that the son squanders all the money on dissolute living – further dishonoring his father, his people, Torah (the law), and God before the Gentiles. Jesus continues to increase the younger son's deficits by saying that the land experienced famine, and the boy was forced to live with the pigs which are exceedingly unclean animals. The boy not only touches the pigs, he lives with them, and longs to put pig food inside of him – rendering him impure both inside and outside. Jesus' audience would not only have been dismayed by the boy's heartless and evil conduct, but also disgusted by his impurity.

Once Jesus has finished describing the son's seemingly irredeemable character, he begins the second movement of the Parable. He implies that the son is in such great pain that he would do just about anything to get some relief. The son probably thinks that the father has disowned

him, but in order to get relief from his pain, he decides to take a chance that the father might accept him back in a qualified way. He devises a plan to ask the father to forgive him and take him back into the household as a servant (a demotion from son to slave); so he proceeds toward his homeland and the family farm.

Before proceeding to the third movement of the Parable, we should examine what Jesus' audience probably thought about the son's plan. They probably would have believed that the end of the story would be the father justifiably sending out a delegation to inform the son that he had been disowned and had no further right to be on his property – “if you wanted to live in the land of the Gentiles, and throw away everything I have given you, then go back to ‘your’ people – your way of life and your “religion.”

But the story takes a completely unexpected turn. Remember the father in this story is Jesus' revelation of *Abba*. The father sees the boy coming from afar – as if he has been looking for him, and when he catches sight of him, he runs out to meet him overwhelmed with love and joy. He shows no anger at the son for his heartlessness and dishonor. He has not stopped loving – unconditionally loving – his son for a single second, and that love has caused him to feel immense worry for his son's welfare. The mere sight of the boy causes the father's worry to dissipate, and he does not want to lose a single second in radically accepting his son back into the house.

Jesus then continues the story – the father's first action is to throw his arms around the boy and to kiss him. His affection for his son has not diminished at all. It is as if he had done nothing to humiliate and dishonor his father and family. Rembrandt painted a remarkable portrayal of this scene (called *The Return of the Prodigal Son*). In it the father has a look of tremendous relief, love, compassion, and joy. He also has both a masculine and feminine hand with which he is embracing his boy.

The son now takes out his rehearsed lines – “Father, I have sinned against you, and I no longer deserve to be called your son. Just treat me like one of your servants.” However, the father is not interested in the rehearsed lines, and certainly has no intention of treating the boy as a slave. He knows there is no time to be lost so the first word out of his mouth is “Quick!” He asks that the best cloak be brought out for him. Recall that cloaks were worn by only people of high rank, and so the father is asking that his son be treated, as it were, like royalty. He then asks that sandals be given to him to take care of his temporal needs and to show that he is no longer a slave, but a freed man. He then proceeds to give the son a signet ring (explained above) indicating that he belongs in the family one hundred percent. He has not lost a scintilla of his former status as son. The father is so overjoyed that he kills the fatted calf (the very best animal he has) and begins to celebrate a feast. Remember this is your God.

A fourth movement of the parable now begins. Jesus indicates that the older son (who has been faithful to his father and has worked hard on the farm without benefit of his brother's labor while his brother was squandering the family fortune in a foreign land) hears the music and merriment, and asks one of the servants about it. The servant indicates that his brother was back, and that his father is overjoyed, and has killed the fatted calf. The older son (who represents the Pharisees) is justifiably indignant and hurt. He feels like he has received no reward for his

fidelity and labors throughout his brothers absence, and even worse, that the father has shown his heartless and irresponsible little brother greater favor than himself – “You never gave me so much as a kid to celebrate with *my* friends.”

At this juncture Jesus indicates that the father comes out to meet his older boy. He says that the father implores him. The Greek word here is “*parakaleō*” which has a multifaceted meaning. It means first to call to one’s side in order to give comfort or consolation to someone who is intimate, and it also carries the meaning of begging, pleading, beseeching, or entreating – which puts the person making the request in a humble, weak, or even servile position. Why did Jesus use a word in Aramaic that would be translated by this Greek word? He wants to establish how God the Father feels toward the Pharisees who have been loyal to Torah (and the Old Covenant) for many years. So how does God feel toward them? He feels like they are intimates – and that he can call them to his side in order to give them consolation. He is not beneath making the humble gesture of begging or pleading with them to come back into the house, because he loves them deeply and appreciates their loyalty. To demonstrate this, he makes an absolute pledge to them – “You have been with me always, and everything I have is yours. Now, come back into the house, for these sinners were lost and are found; they were dead and have come back to life.” The father is willing to give these loyal servants everything he has (*before* he dies) to demonstrate his love and gratitude to them.

Though Jesus has confronted the Pharisees with their hypocrisy and self-righteousness – particularly when they imply that sinners are not welcome to God’s Kingdom, he wants to assure them that his Father loves them unconditionally, and will bestow His Kingdom upon them. Interestingly, Jesus does not give an ending to this part of the Parable – He does not say whether the older son goes back into the house because He does not know how each Pharisee will react to His invitation to the Kingdom. Nevertheless, the invitation to God’s Kingdom remains unconditionally open to their acceptance of it.