

“GOD LOVES YOU EVEN WHEN YOU DON’T LOVE HIM!”

by Rom A. Pegram (5/6/18)

To illustrate the point further, Jesus told them this story: “A man had two sons. ¹² The younger son told his father, ‘I want my share of your estate now before you die.’ So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons. ¹³ “A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living. ¹⁴ About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. ¹⁵ He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶ The young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ “When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, ‘At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸ I will go home to my father and say, “Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, ¹⁹ and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant.”’ ²⁰ “So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. ²¹ His son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.’ ²² “But his father said to the servants, ‘Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. ²³ And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, ²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.’ So the party began. ²⁵ “Meanwhile, the older son was in the fields working. When he returned home, he heard music and dancing in the house, ²⁶ and he asked one of the servants what was going on. ²⁷ ‘Your brother is back,’ he was told, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf. We are celebrating because of his safe return.’ ²⁸ “The older brother was angry and wouldn’t go in. His father came out and begged him, ²⁹ but he replied, ‘All these years I’ve slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. ³⁰ Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the fattened calf!’ ³¹ “His father said to him, ‘Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours. ³² We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!’” – Luke 15:11-32 (NLT)

In 22 short verses—through characters in today’s story in particular, we can see our life *with* God pretty clearly. While this story is usually referred to as ‘The Parable of the Prodigal Son’, I want to suggest it’s the FATHER who’s the main character—not the son(s)! The FATHER’s mentioned at least 12 times in these 22 verses. While entire books have been written on the two sons, the FATHER—the central figure—is often overlooked ... but, I don’t want to do that today!

- It’s the father who loves his prodigal son even when his son doesn’t love him...
- It’s the father who shows the deepest emotion as he waits by that lonely road ... for his son’s return...
- It’s the father who initiates the process of forgiveness...

- It's the father who leaps to his feet and runs to greet a starving, road-weary son who's done nothing but insult him...
- And it's the father who never stops loving his older son, pleading with him to experience the joy of his brother's restored life...

This parable is about a human father and his sons, but it alludes to an even greater story about our Heavenly Father's love for all lost sons & daughters—wherever they are. Let me start with some background, then we'll get to today's story...

The word *prodigal* only appears once in certain versions of the Bible (NKJV). We're told the younger son 'wasted his possessions with prodigal living' (Luke 15:13). We may come to think *prodigal* refers to rebellion or rebellious living. But, it actually means 'recklessly spendthrift'—*to spend until you have nothing left...*

Surprisingly, that word can also be used to describe the FATHER. He not only gives his departing son everything he asked for but showers him with gifts when he returns! And to the older son he says (Luke 15:31), "...all that I have is yours." The father's treatment of his two sons is seriously 'reckless.' The difference between the father and the first son, of course, is: The son's being *prodigal* ... *is* wayward and self-centered. The father's being *prodigal* ... *is* loving and selfless—*quite different indeed...*

So, what does this story tell us, amongst other things? **GOD LOVES THE LOST.** This story is similar to the previous story of the lost sheep ... or the lost coin. In all these, we can see GOD LOVES THE LOST—even *those who don't love him...* like this:

GOD LOVES YOU WHEN YOU'RE WOUNDING HIS HEART. Verses 11-12 begin: To illustrate the point further, Jesus told them this story: "A man had two sons. ¹²The younger son told his father, 'I want my share of your estate now before you die.' So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons."

In studying other middle-eastern cultures, we find that what this younger son was really saying was: "Dad, I wish you were dead. You are in the way of my plans. You are a barrier. I want my freedom. I want my fulfillment. And I want out of this family now. I have other plans that don't involve you; they don't involve this family; they don't involve this estate; they don't even involve this village. I want nothing more to do with you—*any of you.* Give me my inheritance now. I'm out of here!"

While this kind of behavior wouldn't go over very well today, it was a hundred times more insulting in a Jewish family of Jesus' day. Not only did this young man insult his father and his family, but he also insulted his community. There were no secrets in small villages of that day. With the sale of real estate (selling off assets), their rift would have gone public—the entire family subjected to shame. And yet, *the father let him go.* There's no hint of pleading, retaliation, or angry shouting. His father's heart was broken, but he loves his son—*enough to let go.* **GOD LOVES YOU WHEN YOU'RE WOUNDING HIS HEART;** also...

GOD LOVES YOU WHEN YOU'RE WALKING AWAY FROM HIM. Verse 13 tells us: "A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land..."

In his book *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, Henri Nouwen shows that the prodigal was turning his back on more than just his home. He was arrogantly dismissing all that was good:

The son's 'leaving' is...a much more offensive act than it seems at first reading. It is a heartless rejection of the home in which the son was born and nurtured and a break with the most precious tradition carefully upheld by the community of which he was a part. When Luke writes, "and left for the distant country," he indicates much more than the desire of a young man to see more of the world. He speaks about a drastic cutting loose from the way of living, thinking, and acting that has been handed down to him from generation to generation as a sacred legacy. More than disrespect, it is a betrayal of the treasured values of family and community. The 'distant country' is the world in which everything considered holy at home is disregarded.

Isn't it hard to restrain yourself, as parents, when you see your kids heading for a brick wall? Despite his own personal agony and rejected love, he allows the boy to leave. Just like God, he wanted the boy to stay out of love, of his own free will! **GOD LOVES YOU WHEN YOU'RE WALKING AWAY FROM HIM**, and...

GOD LOVES YOU WHEN YOU'RE WASTING YOUR LIFE. Verses 13-14 say: "...and there he wasted all his money in wild living. ¹⁴ About the time his money ran out..." It's hard to imagine a more graphic picture of *unrestrained sinfulness*—the wasting of life—with women, drink and excess; yet his father, far away as he is, loves his son even when he's squandering everything he's been given...

GOD LOVES YOU WHEN YOU'RE WALLOWING IN SIN. Verses 14-16 share: "...a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. ¹⁵ He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶ The young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything."

I think 'wallowing' is a good word here—just like the pigs he was feeding... I also believe this is when the boy began to think of 'home'—at the lowest point in the prodigal's story: Here he is, the son of a wealthy Jewish landowner, living among what—for a Jew—was the most unclean and despised animals on the face of the earth. He finds himself 'wallowing' in shame and poverty ... but he begins to think of home ... and his father's love!

GOD LOVES YOU WHEN YOU'RE WORKING TO COME BACK. Verses 17-19 elaborate: "When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, 'At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸ I will go home to my father and say, "Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, ¹⁹ and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant.'" This, folks, is the turning point of the story: At the moment of his greatest misery, 'he finally came to his senses,' sort of...

Question: Where's the repentance? Where's the admission that he's done wrong and is sorry? *'Not there that I can see...* He simply decides going back home is his best bet ... *out of desperation*; he expects to become one of his father's servants. And, despite still carrying 'the illusion of control'—manipulating himself back into the family, he begins to think of his father's love. ... When we're still drowning in the misconception that we can still 'fix it' (whatever 'it' is), GOD LOVES US, TOO ... *even in the midst of our false assumptions!*

GOD LOVES YOU WHEN YOU'RE WRAPPED IN HIS ARMS OF FORGIVENESS.

Verses 20-21 continue: "So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. ²¹ His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.'" Despite all the son had done to the father, it was the father who ran to him—who initiated the process of forgiveness; now THAT'S LOVE...

GOD LOVES YOU WHEN YOU'RE WELCOMED BACK HOME. Verses 22-24 share the father's reaction: "But his father said to the servants, 'Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. ²³ And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, ²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.' So the party began." The son finally tells his father that he's sinned—he repents; it was all true, of course ... but, how did the father respond? With a robe, a ring, and sandals—all signs to make clear that this was his son—*not a servant*; this, folks, was pure LOVE in response...

GOD LOVES YOU WHEN YOU WON'T LOVE HIM. Verses 25-32 is all about the older son, who was lost as well. The *lostness* of the older son is much harder to identify than that of the younger. Outwardly, the older son is faultless ... but, inwardly, a dark power erupts in him and boils to the surface. The older son has based his relationship with family on his own obedience, rather than his father's love ...and, as a result, he ends up alienated from both...

There you have it—the *greatest short story ever told!* It gives us *so many answers* and yet ... it leaves us with *one last question*. Jesus surely had something on his mind when he told the three 'lost' stories, ending with the lost son. So, what was it? *What was it that stirred Jesus' heart to share this masterpiece?* Let's take another quick look at the story (vv. 1-2): "Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to him to hear him. And the Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them.'"

Here, we see Jesus surrounded by people with great needs—physically hungry and spiritually hungry, people eager to hear his teaching. But when Jesus would look up to the fringe of the crowd, he'd see another group—the Pharisees & scribes, and they were there to simply find fault. They didn't like what Jesus said; even more, they didn't like what Jesus did ... and with whom! To them, Jesus was throwing himself away on those they considered immoral. Clearly, *Jesus view of the lost was quite different from*

the Pharisee's view! The Pharisees, of course, knew all about the lost and found; *they* were the found and as for the lost—well, let them be. But, 'you know what? Jesus loved them, too ... and the Pharisees were bewildered by that...

Jesus told these stories to point out to everyone just who *a lost person* was. The sinners, of course, saw themselves in the story. The Pharisees probably didn't, until at the end we find out that *both sons were lost!* THEY were the older son ... and Jesus was suggesting some serious propositions: The *lost* could be forgiven ... The *found* might actually be 'lost' ... And, finally, *GOD LOVES BOTH!* The Pharisees could now see Jesus inviting them to a party, to be restored to a forgotten FATHER—the FATHER whose greatest law turned out to be ... LOVE!

Finally, Jesus lifts his eyes one more time ... and looks past the Pharisees to another set of eyes. He looks down through time to this very moment and his eyes meet yours. He wants you to know that whichever son represents you in this story, the result is the same: GOD LOVES YOU, EVEN WHEN YOU DON'T LOVE HIM! He's inviting you to a party—a celebration of the lost ... finally being found—a love being restored. Will you accept his invitation? *This God who loves you ... is waiting for your answer today...*