

# The Prodigal Son

Luke 15:11-32

There was a man who had 2 sons. The younger one said to his father, "Father, let me have the share of the estate that will come to me". So the father divided the property between them. A few days later, the younger son got together everything he had and left for a distant country where he squandered his money on a life of debauchery. When he had spent it all, that country experienced a severe famine, and now he began to feel the pinch so he hired himself out to one of the local inhabitants who put him on his farm to feed the pigs. And he would willingly have filled himself with the husks the pigs were eating but no one would let him have them. Then he came to his senses and said, "How many of my father's hired men have all the food they want and more, and here I am dying of hunger! I will leave this place and go to my father and say: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired men...". So he left the place and went back to his father. While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with pity. He ran to the boy, clasped him in his arms and kissed him. Then his son said, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son". But the father said to his servants, "Quick! Bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the calf we have been fattening, and kill it; we will celebrate by having a feast, because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found". And they began to celebrate. Now the elder son was out in the fields, and on his way back, as he drew near the house, he could hear music and dancing. Calling one of the servants he asked what it was all about. The servant told him, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the calf we had been fattening because he has got him back safe and sound". He was angry then and refused to go in, and his father came out and began to urge him to come in; but he retorted to his father, "All these years I have slaved for you and never once disobeyed any orders of yours, yet you never offered me so much as a kid for me to celebrate with my friends. But, for this son of yours, when he comes back after swallowing up your property – he and his loose women – you kill the calf we had been fattening". The father said, "My son, you are with me always, and all I have is yours. But it was only right we should celebrate and rejoice, because your brother here was dead and has come to life; he was lost and is found".

In preparation for this message today, I have been looking through a book by Henri Nouwen called *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. In reciting the passage Nouwen prefers to call the parable *The Story of 2 Sons and their Father*. It has of course also been called the parable of the lost son, and is preceded in Luke's Gospel by the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. So much has been said about this parable and I want to reiterate some of that today as well, because one of the great things about good news is that we need never tire of hearing it. Some of you here have probably read the Bible every day for years, and if not every day, then very regularly, and you know all the stories, yet you continue to go back to it, because it's good news.

To call this parable the story of the lost son or the prodigal son is to miss half the story. Why didn't Jesus finish the parable after verse 24 when they began to celebrate at the return of the lost son? What a happy ending. The son squanders all he has, wrecks his life, then comes back to the fold, the father welcomes him; everyone is happy and there is feasting and merriment. But Jesus didn't tell parables to have happy endings. This is really the parable of the 2 sons and their father, as I think Henri Nouwen puts it so well. Some months ago when I read this story out as one of the Bible readings at the Collingwood church, I started off by asking the congregation to think about which of the sons they might represent. And I encourage you to do the same today – which of the sons might you represent in this parable? I know for me I have been both at different times in my life. Going back to this parable, I was reminded again how often Jesus spoke against the Pharisees. He warned against the 'yeast of the Pharisees'. And in telling this parable, and preceding it with the parables of the lost sheep and the lost son, we are told that the tax collectors and 'sinners' were all gathering around to hear him, and that the Pharisees were complaining that this Jesus guy was hanging around these 'sinners'. It is in this context that Jesus told the 3 parables, and provocatively, he finishes his storytelling by telling of the reaction of the older brother, the one who, as we are told in the story, had stayed home all these years and had never disobeyed the father.

I will get back to this point in a moment. But this claim by the older brother that he had never disobeyed any orders, also reminded me of the rich ruler who had also kept all the commandments since he was a boy. But Jesus said that for him this wasn't enough. The rich ruler thought he was doing ok up to this point. But Jesus has a habit of causing a crisis in our lives. Just when we think we are doing ok, He points out something which we are holding back. In the case of the rich ruler, it was of course his riches, and he went away very sad. In the case of

the older brother, his self-righteousness and lack of compassion, not to mention his lack of joy, were pointed out to him.

But note that the father still calls him 'my son' and invites him to also come and share the joy of the younger son's return. We are not told if the older son did in fact 'come to *his* senses' and join the festivities. But the father's offer was there. Not only was the offer there, but it was there in all the enthusiasm and abundance that it was for the younger son. Notice that the father also *came out* to the elder son, just as he came out to the younger son. God always comes out to meet us, despite our waywardness as in the case of the younger son, or our arrogance and pride, as in the case of the elder son.

The offence of the younger son asking for his inheritance Consider the complete offence it was for the younger son to ask his father for the inheritance. Taking into account the context of the story and the situation of the son asking his father for his inheritance rights now, it was equivalent to the younger son saying to his father, I wish you were dead.

Despite the overwhelmingly arrogant and dismissive attitude of the younger son, the amazing compassion of the father is highlighted even more by the fact that he still comes out to meet his son when he returns home. From the father, there is no attitude of "I told you you'd come squirming back to me", or "don't think that you can come crawling back to me after what you've done!". There is only the most amazing and incomprehensible love and mercy, as I have said, highlighted all the more by the way his son has treated him. It is while we were still sinners that Christ died for us (read Romans 5:6-8). It was while we were still shaking our fists at Him in rage that he chose to die for us. What sort of love is this, a love that we cannot comprehend? A love that naturally has us say to ourselves that we do not deserve this. Do you ever feel like 'this is too good to be true?'; that I really don't deserve this, I'm really not this deserving. I mean, I know God loves me and all that, but He couldn't possibly love me *this* much. We will never be able to comprehend the fullness of God's love for us – the fact that He willingly left heaven and chose to die for us in our sorry, sin-sick rotten state.

The younger son certainly felt undeserving. He said "I no longer deserve to be called your son". I think the son realised how terrible his sin was – how offensive it was to his father, and he was thoroughly ashamed and repentant. But his father wasn't concerned about how much his son had hurt him – his son had come back and that is all that mattered to him. As Nouwen points out, "the immense joy in welcoming back the lost son hides the immense sorrow that has gone before". He didn't ask for any 'please explains' or hold anything back. He just held him and loved him. 'A broken and contrite spirit he will not despise'.

'He came to his senses' – this could be a classic definition of what conversion is – a coming to our senses.

Leo Tolstoy said that the human soul is Christian in its nature. We were created to be Christlike. Tolstoy says that Christianity is always accepted by people as a remembrance of something forgotten. Can you remember back to when you first became a Christian? I recall back in my teens that I suddenly saw the Bible through different eyes, it suddenly lit my way. Verses stuck out to me and just had an impact on the core of my being. I remember reading the Book of Proverbs. In the Good News version of the Bible, which I had at the time, the proverbs on wisdom started with the instruction to "my son", and to a 15 year old shy teenager, I remember it just hit me. As I read them, I remember thinking that wow, *this* is how I want to live. I realised that this is how I had been wanting to live my life but I had never consciously realised it. Something that was always there just came to the forefront of my mind. Looking back on it, it was like it was just the natural next step in my development as a human being. It was like it was always going to happen. It was a remembrance of something forgotten. My overwhelming sense was that this was what I had been looking for all my life. Being told some time later that people had been praying for me for years to become a Christian just increased my faith even more.

In thinking about the 'coming to his senses' of the younger son, I was also reminded of Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, just a few chapters further on in Luke's Gospel, in which the tax collector beats his chest in humility before God and asks for mercy, while the Pharisee in his self-righteous contempt of anyone not as worthy as he, thanks God that he is not like this despicable tax collector.

What was it that caused the younger son to come home? What was it that made him finally turn his back on his own lifestyle and return home? What made him come to his senses?

Well, the passage tells us that he realised that the people back at Dad's place had it much better than him, that despite all his living the good life and being wild and free, it just didn't compare to what he had had at Dad's place. The promise of life in the far country was a lie. Not only that, but the younger son saw it. He saw it and was tired of it. He was tired of his lifestyle – this endless searching for something that he could never find. He came to his senses when he realised that he was never going to find what he was looking for in the life he was leading. And he remembered that there was something far better back home.

Remember how we said before that conversion is always a remembrance of something forgotten – often something long forgotten. We can only really accept the all-embracing love of the father when we are tired of our sinfulness. The Psalms remind us that 'it's your kindness that leads us to repentance oh Lord'. The younger son was tired of his sinfulness, of continually striving for himself, searching for something he could never find.

There is an element of grief in repentance, in turning around to begin the journey home. The life that the younger son had been leading had become familiar to him, it became part of who he was, part of his identity. It wouldn't have been easy for him to turn around, there still would have been the very strong pull of the former life. I wonder if, on his long journey back to his father, he ever had second thoughts – thoughts of turning around again and going back to his life of debauchery. I reckon there would have been some temptation in that. Therefore, to go right back to the father, he would have experienced grief, as well as being sick of his sin. I read in a book some time ago, a play on the statement by Jesus that 'you will know the truth and the truth will make you free'. This one said, 'the truth shall make you free, but first it will make you miserable'. How much more encouraging it is to us then to have God waiting for us with outstretched arms when we return home. He knows what we have gone through. He is aware of the emotions we are feeling.

You know, I think a major issue with the Church today is that we don't take our sinfulness seriously enough. With the focus on self esteem and building up your self-image, we have lost the seriousness of our sinfulness. We don't let our sinfulness drive us towards God – we don't let it drive us to our knees so we can allow God to come out and run to us and embrace us and put on a party for us. I wonder if part of the reason is because we feel undeserving; we can't face the fact that we have turned against the One we love so much. When we are tired of our sinfulness and face the depth of it, then and only then are we able to let God embrace us as He so desperately wants to. Then we will realise that there is nothing in all the world that can separate us from His love. There is nothing we have done that can make Him turn and reject us. He always wants us back – He is *desperate* to have us back. *We are never too old or too young* – we can *always* be of service to our Father. I'm always encouraged by the man on the cross next to Jesus who defended Him – I mean you could say he left it a bit late but it doesn't matter – Jesus told him that this very day he would be in paradise with Jesus Himself. The old saying is true that while there is life there is hope.

This absolute goodness of God also reminds me of the parable of the labourers in the vineyard, where labourers are hired throughout the day to work for the boss, and when it comes time at the end of the day for all of them to be paid, the ones who started first get their money. Then to their horror, they see that the ones who started very late in the day and only did an hour's work were paid exactly the same amount. I've always struggled with this parable and the fairness of it. It's actually the seeming lack of fairness that has me struggling with it. I mean, a fair day's pay for a

day's work, and the ones who work an hour should get paid an hour. That's only fair isn't it? But it's not fair in God's sight. Philip Yancey has said that this is a parable showing the amazing grace of God. And grace is not fair. But it's not supposed to be fair – that's why the criminal on the cross next to Jesus joined Him in paradise, along with the greatest saints we can think of. That's why the younger son was greeted back with such over the top love and mercy. This is a parable that challenges us to not think of ourselves, but to see how generous God is. Nouwen says that this parable shows that God wants us to be deeply grateful that we have the opportunity to work for the boss and to see how good and generous He is. Compare this to the attitude of the elder son. Who is it that we most often represent? The fact that for years I have struggled with the whole point of the parable of the labourers in the vineyard shows that my attitude has been more like that of the elder son. I have been more concerned with myself and being shown some sort of recognition for my years of being a Christian, than with dwelling on the absolute goodness of God towards me, and not only me, but to anyone who is undeserving.

As we have touched on already, the return of the younger son shows his admission that his way of life has not worked. He has realised that the only way to make life work is to come back to the father in submission to him. He has seen that the only way to make life work is if it is not on his terms. During the week I was reading Paul's 2nd letter to the Corinthians and I was really struck by Paul wanting to boast about his weaknesses. Let me read the passage for you (read 2 Cor 11:30). Then a little bit further on, he talks about his thorn in the flesh (read 2 Cor 12:7b-10). He will boast all the more gladly of his weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in him. Then he finishes it off with the statement that "when I am weak, then I am strong". If you're reading this for the first time about Paul wanting to boast about his weaknesses, you might think, what kind of mixed up guy is this?! Think of the things you want to boast about in your life – they're always about your achievements aren't they? You say them because you want to impress those around you. Well Paul also wanted to impress those around him, but he wanted to impress Christ on them, not himself. Paul, just like the prodigal son, knew that the only way to make life work was in total submission to the father. He knew that when he surrendered totally to the father, then he was strong. On his own he was nothing – *that* is why he could boast in his weaknesses. No wonder he could then say, 'I have learnt to be content regardless of the circumstances. I love how the message of the Bible just fits together – it is amazingly consistent. I've mentioned different parables so far. Jesus told the story of the lost son, showing the son who came to his senses and realised that life was to be found nowhere else but in submission to his father. Paul learnt what it was to actually boast in his weaknesses so that the power of Christ would dwell in him. He knew that there was no room for Christ if he lived in his own strength. And I am also reminded of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane – the garden of tears as it has also been called – in his anguish at what he was about to go through – He still prayed, "not my will, but thine be done". He knew that salvation could come about no other way but in total submission to the father. That total submission gave him the strength to go out and complete his mission. The opening scene of the Passion of the Christ movie shows this so powerfully. It shows Jesus leaving the disciples to go over to pray. Then the devil is there tempting him, saying 'you don't really want to die for this lot do you? It won't change them'. Jesus is just kneeling, praying, sweating drops of blood in his anguish while the snake is tempting him. Then suddenly Jesus gets up and stomps on the head of the snake and sets off with renewed vigour to complete his mission. Jesus lived out what he taught in the parable of the 2 sons – in that sense he was the younger son coming in total surrender and submission to the father. When I am weak, then I am strong – what amazing words, what powerful words. Isn't the gospel full of these statements of seeming amazing irony – we are made strong in our weakness – we are told to lose our life to keep it. The road to life seems like, and often feels like, the road to death. But the prodigal son had already been on the real road to death and he knew what it was like to return home – he had a remembrance of something long forgotten – a taste of something far better.

We've looked at different emphases on this parable today, and while there are different interpretations of what this parable is really about and why Jesus told it, the thing we cannot escape from is that, whatever you may think is the real emphasis of the parable, it undoubtedly tells of God's unconditional and unshakeable love for us, his people, whether you're a million

miles from Him or if you've never felt closer to Him. It's this that I want to leave you with today. I said before that good news is good news because we never tire of hearing it. I want to illustrate this by re-telling a story that Philip Yancey tells in his book, 'What's So Amazing About Grace?' to bring it into a contemporary context.

A young girl grows up in the tourist beach town of Ocean Grove, just past Geelong. Her parents, a bit old-fashioned, tend to over-react to her nose ring, the music she listens to, and the length of her skirts. They ground her a few times, and she seethes inside. "I hate you!" she screams at her father when he knocks on the door of her room after an argument, and that night she acts on a plan she has mentally rehearsed scores of times. She runs away.

She has visited Melbourne only once before, on a bus trip with her church youth group to watch a one-day cricket match. Because newspapers in Ocean Grove report in lurid detail the increasing violence and social problems in inner city Melbourne, she concludes that it is the last place her parents will look for her. Torquay maybe, or Lorne, but not inner-city Melbourne.

Her second day there, around the Fitzroy area, she meets a man who drives the biggest car she's ever seen. He offers her a ride, buys her lunch, arranges a place for her to stay. He gives her some pills that make her feel better than she's ever felt before. She was right all along, she decides: her parents were keeping her from all the fun.

The good life continues for a month, two months, a year. The man with the big car – she calls him "Boss" – teaches her a few things that men like. Since she's underage, men pay a premium for her. She lives in a penthouse, and orders room service whenever she wants. Occasionally she thinks about the folks back home, but their lives now seem so boring and provincial that she can hardly believe she grew up there.

She has a brief scare when she sees her picture printed on the back of a milk carton with the headline "Have you seen this child?". But by now she has blond hair, and with all the makeup and body piercing jewelry she wears, nobody would mistake her for a child. Besides, most of her friends are runaways, and nobody squeals on the streets of Fitzroy.

After a year the first sallow signs of illness appear, and it amazes her how fast the boss turns mean. "These days we can't mess around," he growls, and before she knows it she's out on the street without a cent to her name. She still turns a couple of tricks a night, but they don't pay much, and all the money goes to support her habit. When winter blows in she finds herself sleeping on metal grates outside a big supermarket. "Sleeping" is really the wrong word – a teenage girl at night in the inner-city can never relax her guard. Dark bands circle her eyes. Her cough worsens.

One night as she lies awake listening for footsteps, all of a sudden everything about her life looks different. She no longer feels like a woman of the world. She feels like a little girl, lost in a cold and frightening city. She begins to whimper. Her pockets are empty and she's hungry. She needs a fix. She pulls her legs tight underneath her and shivers under the newspapers she's piled atop her coat. Something jolts a distant memory and a single image fills her mind: of summer in Ocean Grove, running along the beach on those balmy summer days, the waves crashing in on the surf beach as she laps up the sun and the sand with her golden retriever dashing in and out of the waves in chase of a tennis ball. God, why did I leave, she says to herself, and pain stabs at her heart. My dog back home eats better than I do now. She's sobbing, and she knows in a flash that more than anything else in the world she just wants to go home.

Three straight phone calls, three straight connections with the answering machine. She hangs up without leaving a message the first two times, but the third time she says, "Dad, Mum, it's me. I was wondering about maybe coming home. I'm catching a bus down your way and it'll get there tomorrow evening. If you're not there, well, I guess I'll just stay on the bus until it gets to Adelaide.

It takes a couple of hours for a bus to make all the stops between Melbourne and Ocean Grove, and during that time she realises the flaws in her plan. What if her parents are out of town and miss the message? Shouldn't she have waited another day or so until she could talk to them? And even if they are home, they probably wrote her off as dead long ago. She should have given them some time to overcome the shock. Her thoughts bounce back and forth between those worries and the speech she is preparing for her father. "Dad, I'm sorry. I know I was wrong. It's not your fault; it's all mine. Can you forgive me?" She says the words over and over, her throat tightening even as she rehearses them. She hasn't apologised to anyone in years.

The bus has been driving with lights on since Geelong. Tiny raindrops hit the road rubbed worn by thousands of tyres, and the asphalt steams. She's forgotten how dark it gets at night out here. A kangaroo darts across the road and the bus swerves. Every so often, a billboard. A sign posting the distance to Ocean Grove. Oh, God.

When the bus finally rolls into the station, its air brakes hissing in protest, the driver announces in a crackly voice over the microphone, "Fifteen minutes, folks. That's all we have here". Fifteen minutes to decide her life. She checks herself in a compact mirror, smoothes her hair, and licks the lipstick off her teeth. She looks at the tobacco stains on her fingertips, and wonders if her parents will notice. If they're there.

She walks into the terminal not knowing what to expect. Not one of the thousand scenes that have played out in her mind prepare her for what she sees. There, in the concrete-walls-and-plastic-chairs bus terminal in Ocean Grove, stands a group of forty brothers and sisters and great aunts and uncles and cousins and a grandmother and great-grandmother to boot. They're all wearing goofy party hats and blowing noise-makers, and taped across the entire wall of the terminal is a huge computer-generated banner that reads "Welcome home!".

Out of the crowd of well-wishers breaks her dad. She stares out through the tears quivering in her eyes like hot mercury and begins the memorised speech, "Dad, I'm sorry. I know..." He interrupts her. "Sshhh, it's ok, child. We've got no time for that. No time for apologies. You'll be late for the party. A banquet's waiting for you at home".

This is a God who doesn't know when to stop loving. As long as we live, we will never be able to comprehend the complete and total love of the Father towards us, when we are so undeserving. Amen.

*by Nils von Kalm*  
*7 November 2004*