

God's Prodigal Love

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 (March 27, 2022)

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¹Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” ³So he told them this parable:

¹¹Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ ²⁰So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²²But 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 on his feet. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate. ²⁵“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ ³¹Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

Historical Context

Shame-honor culture is dominant in modern Palestine as it was dominant in first-century Palestine. Jesus begins his parable with the younger son asking his father for an advance on his inheritance. In Jesus’ shame-honor culture, asking a living parent for an early inheritance is rude; it was the equivalent of saying ‘I wish you were dead.’ Children who make such a request lose their respect and honor, and their community ostracizes them. The parent’s response to their children’s request is usually a wave of great anger.

Theme: God's Prodigal Love

Jesus tells the parable of the prodigal love of a father to respond to the Pharisees and the scribes who grumble about him mingling with sinners and tax collectors and eating with them (Luke 15:1-2). Jesus responds to his critics who focused on the sins of the tax collectors and sinners.

Jesus demonstrates that God cares about the sinners and rejoices when they repent. Jesus eating with the sinners symbolizes the feast and joy in heaven over one sinner who repents. Jesus' critics act like the elder son who refuses to rejoice with God over the repentant sinners. God begs them to join the celebration like the prodigal father in the parable.

Jesus tells us through this parable that God's prodigal grace and love reaches out to the sinners and outcasts, and God also does not leave out the Pharisees and the scribes. This parable should not be called the prodigal son but "God's prodigal love".

Jesus deliberately has an open-ended story. He wants his hearers to fit themselves into the story and act out the ending.