

Everybody knows this gospel story; you could probably recite the basic outline: younger son wants his freedom; dad lets him go; when things go badly the kid returns home and surprisingly dad welcomes him back; older son feels taken advantage of. It is a story about human emotions and desires that we know so well and let's be honest we have mixed feeling about the whole thing.

How we label things changes how we appreciate them. It matters whether we call something: a great value or cheap; freedom fighters or terrorists; aggressive or proactive. So when we call this the parable the Prodigal Son, we focus on the younger son who wants to leave home, wants to go his own way, and wants independence from the family. Isn't this simply the story of every young person who has wanted to see the world beyond home – like Dorothy looking for somewhere over the rainbow or Luke Skywalker wanting to see the galaxy. This is something most of us have experienced and it is an entirely natural thing. Maybe the kid was a little wild, a little too impatient but part of us has some sympathy for him. After all, the younger son had a right to his inheritance. Maybe this was his best opportunity to leave home. And haven't there been times when we got homesick or decided we had made a mistake and would do anything if we could undo the hurt we caused? See—mixed feelings. But before we try to sort this out we need to ask if this parable is really focused on the leaving and returning of the younger son?

Some folk call this the parable of the Forgiving Father, and the focus is on the fact that the father was not concerned with how He was offended, he was concerned about his son who was lost. We focus on the father's joy at seeing His Son approaching and seeking forgiveness. Yet, in a darker moment, we might question the actions of the Father, thinking that he caused the heartache in the first place by giving in to the brat. Now, maybe feeling guilty, he was going overboard in welcoming him home.

And some part of us wants to say that real people would never do that. There is part of us that thinks sometimes we have a right to hold a grudge.

When some call this the parable of the Elder Brother, the intention is to lead us to recognize that the Father's forgiveness of the sinner has to be embraced by all. There is a lot to be learnt from the older brother. Staying at home and being dutiful is one thing, but to do so with a hard heart is quite another. He needed to learn to be unselfish and generous and not to feel that his compliance had somehow earned him credit. On the other hand, in some hidden corner of our heart, we might also think that the elder son had a point. He's been the good one, working to support his father. Why shouldn't he be upset that his brother, who caused his father so much pain, should return and be welcomed so warmly? There is a part of us that, in similar circumstances, wants to say, "Good riddance to bad rubbish."

While it is easy to feel sympathy for all the characters in the story, maybe the reasons we feel sympathetic actually reveal some of our own spiritual struggles:

The parts of us that think that the younger son had a right to demand his inheritance and do what he wanted with his money are those parts that don't take seriously our own responsibility for the gifts we have received from the Lord. When we decide it's time to take care of "Number One," we can be consumed by our own selfishness. But if we are grounded in the Lord, we will use whatever gifts he has given us that we can give this love to others.

Those parts of us that think the elder brother was correct are also those parts of us that have not learned to forgive. The elder brother still owned the rest of the farm. "Whatever I have is yours," the father told him. He wasn't told to give a portion of his share of the farm to his brother. He was just asked to welcome the sinner back into the family. But he couldn't because he felt

forgiveness had to be earned, painfully paid for; he wanted only justice when the issue was forgiveness.

Finally, the part of us that gives some credence to the thought that the forgiving father was all too forgiving, is that part of us that is so self-centered it considers every action as it impacts on ourselves. It takes courage and a commitment to Jesus Christ to say that my pain is not important; healing the pain of others is what matters. That is what Jesus did on the Cross. That is what He calls us to do when He says, "Follow me."

Our sympathies for the characters of this story can be hard to sort out; the situations are too close to home. So what was Jesus point in all this? As is often the case, this is a story older than the time of Jesus and, in the classic story, the younger son sows his wild oats but then repents and is welcomed home with joy. The older son resents his father's celebration of his brother's salvation and is rejected by his father. In Luke's parable, however, the focus of attention is on the father's surprise reaction to the elder son's anger. The twist that Jesus adds to the story is the refusal of the father to reject his elder son who in fact is treated by his father with surprising gentleness. When the audience asked why the story had been changed, as we can assume they did, the reply would be that the father is in reality God, who loves his dutiful children just as much as those who are a bit more wild.

The parable of the Prodigal Son, Forgiving Father or Elder Brother, whatever, is calling us to reflect on the depth of our own commitment to the Lord. The wisdom expressed in this parable teaches us that human sin can take the form of wild and rebellious behavior or, perhaps more commonly, of sullen, angry and judgmental attitudes. Those of us who lead quiet and "responsible" lives may very well fall into the trap of sullen, resentful and angry attitudes toward others who seem to be "getting away with murder."

It will help our understanding even more to note that this parable is actually part three of trilogy of stories, a three-part narrative about a lost sheep, a lost coin, and **a lost son**.

Jesus meant for all three stories to function as just one great parable. And so what is common to all three stories? Something precious is lost, resulting in a longing and searching by the owner, and great joy when the lost thing was found. Instead of throwing a tantrum over a loss, God just throws a party over a return. It is scandalous grace, flying in the face of justice, offering mercy that has not been deserved. But Jesus wants us to know that this is what God is like. And when this part of the parable ends, the father is out in the cold, missing the party himself, begging this older son to come in and join in the festivity. This father loves both of his sons more than they deserve, and he gives to each of them far more mercy than they have earned.

Will the older brother heed the father's invitation, will he be reconciled to his brother, will he come inside and join the party? Or for that matter, did the religious folk hearing this parable from Jesus put aside their self-righteous judgment against the sinners who flocked around Jesus, and take a seat at the party with them? We do not know. Jesus ends the parable with the decision of the older brother left open. And each of us will finish the parable by our own actions. Whether we join the party or not, the heavenly party will go on, every time a lost soul comes trembling and broken back home to God. The only question is whether we will take our place at the festivities too.