

Luke 15:11-24 – The Return of the Prodigal Son pt 3: The Father

Last in series on Prodigal Son – RECAP Younger Son and Elder Son

Final part: The Father (**SLIDE**) – central figure of painting. Story could be named after Father ('prodigal' (for way he humiliated himself), 'lovesick', or (more restrained) 'compassionate').

Difficult subject. Can't separate idea of fatherhood from human Fathers:

- No father
- Bad father
- Good fathers – but none perfect, all have flaws.

How then talk of God as Father? Well, the point at the heart of this parable is that God is ultimately our true father, and He doesn't have any of flaws of our own father. So we have to try and banish our own experience for a moment, let the parable speak to us on its own terms: we can't judge the parable just on our own experience, but rather we have to let the parable speak to us about what a true Father is really like. And therefore what God is like.

There's still the problem of how we square that with our own dad. One way which can help is to try and visualise anything positive you've seen of fatherhood, either in your own dad, or others. Regardless of their experience, I think many people (myself included) have an idea in our minds of what an ideal father would be – if any of us have had a bad father, it doesn't stop us wishing for a good one.

As I've got older, though, I've come to realise that ultimately God is the only Father I need. Which is not to say that I don't love my dad, or respect him, or keep in touch with him. He's still my dad. But I don't *need* him to father me anymore, I'm not looking for him to fill some sort of hole in my life – when I need fathering, I look to God. God is my eternal father, and nothing can separate us from that.

So what does a Father look like? What are the qualities of the Father in this story? **Summary: love. Unconditional love.** In fact this story, and ministry of Jesus as a whole, shows us that the *only sort of love is unconditional.* Conditional love – love which expects something in return, makes demands – isn't really love at all. True love endures and is able to keep giving of itself despite circumstances. Obviously that's a high bar and most of us humans hardly get close to it. But it is the nature of love, and if the story shows us anything it shows us the infinite, enduring love of the Father, despite the rejection he experienced from both his children. Or as Nouwen puts it: READ para p93

But love's a hard word to pin down. So let's put a few more details on what the love of the Father looks like. 4 key qualities in story:

Freedom (SLIDE) – right at start. Younger son comes to Father at start of story and makes ultimate insult – ‘dad I wish you were dead’. i.e. I want my money now, and nothing more to do with you. If you were dad, how would you respond? I think of times when one of my children has come to me and asked to buy something which I consider to be a waste of money – usually say ‘no’. Here son asks for whole inheritance.

One of hardest things to accept about God is the fact that he gives us freedom. Sounds strange – most of time we like freedom... except when it has bad consequences, and then we expect God to stop it. We want freedom when it suits us, and not when it doesn’t. But we can’t have it both ways. Free will subject for another time: but today let’s look at it from Father’s point of view. Here’s how Nouwen summarises *the necessity of the Father’s love allowing us freedom*: READ para p95.

So true love gives freedom to the one it loves. And God the Father allows us to be free, that one day we might freely choose to love him in return, as he loves us.

Welcome (SLIDE): seen most movingly in way Father responds to son’s return: READ v20. Many of us as children live or lived in fear of our parents’ disapproval, or of being punished. And this younger son had the right to expect the mother of all punishments. 4 million years on the naughty step. No time on electronic gadgets till 2083.

But what he finds instead is forgiveness, welcome. It’s not that the past doesn’t matter. It’s that the Father’s love can overcome the past. The past does not have to determine the present or the future. The Father’s welcome here points us to the cross, the supreme place where God suffered in order to welcome all those who had wandered far from home.

When we say sorry to God (e.g. in our confession earlier) we need to picture this image of the Father. I think many of us pray that prayer imagining God standing over us with a cane, just about to unleash it, and then reluctantly putting it back on the desk again. But this is the image of God that Jesus wants us to have. When we return and say sorry, what does he do? Runs and kisses him. Tip: when pray confession, picture this image, and it will transform your understanding of what’s going on.

Welcome is an active thing. Father goes to meet the each son. Love reaches out. Or to put it another way: READ quote p106.

Blessing (SLIDE): can be seen in hands (painting) – which moves Nouwen to say this: READ para p95-96. Love leads to blessing – not just the desire to offer freedom and welcome, but the desire to give. Wrestled with right word – initial draft had ‘compassion’ then ‘generosity’ – but settled on blessing as encompasses all of those. In fact can see these other qualities: compassion – READ v24. Striking how thought is for son. Not his own hurt or righteous anger, but sheer joy at the renewed life of the one who had caused him so much pain.

And then generosity: READ v22-23a. God is a lavish giver. He’s not stingy. Here’s how Nouwen describes it, drawing a couple of threads together: READ p111-2.

How would you define love – capacity to bless. To give freely to others. That is what God is like. Moves onto final theme:

Celebration (SLIDE) – natural conclusion. V23: ‘let’s have a feast and celebrate.’ True love is always an invitation to joy. Not escapism, because it recognises that there is sorrow too – son’s return birthed in pain, even if self-inflicted. But love chooses joy over cynicism, celebration over punishment or resentment. That’s why the most common metaphor for heaven is a feast, a party. It’s not a disembodied existence learning to play a harp on a cloud, it’s a knees-up.

So these are the qualities of love: freedom, welcome, blessing, celebration. The love that God the Father has for each of us prodigals, and each of us uptight elder children. God wants us to be free, he welcomes us back, he blesses and he celebrates. *This is what God is like*. And if only we could really believe that, I think most of society would become Christians immediately.

But there is a postscript to this. Because as we’ve journeyed through the parable and thought about what it means for us to be the younger son, then for us to be the elder son, the sting in the tail is that ultimately we are to become like the Father. Jesus the True Son, after all, lived like the Father: John 5:19: ‘What the Father does the Son does too.’ And he calls those who find this love ultimately to pass this same love on to others.

We are to become freedom-bringers, welcomers, people who bless generously and compassionately, people who call others into God’s eternal celebration. That is the journey of a lifetime, but it is the journey we are to take if we are truly to be Christ’s followers. Most of us probably feel a long way from seeing ourselves as Fathers or Mothers in the spiritual sense. And that’s OK. But that is our call. Freely you have received, Jesus says – now freely give.

Straightaway it’s obvious that we couldn’t possibly do this unless we receive freely from God. We can’t manufacture compassion, we can’t give selflessly for any period of time unless God is constantly nourishing us. Which is why we need to keep making the journey of the younger son and the elder son, to keep being transformed by God’s love to us. But slowly and surely, over the years we find the capacity to give this love to others. Look at the painting, at the Father: could you imagine yourself being the one who blesses others in the same way? Would you like to?

As we close, I want us all to look at that Father – that is what God is like. Hands of welcome, of blessing, of celebration. May that touch our hearts, may that draw us to Himself. And for some of us, may that ignite a desire to pass that blessing on to others. Amen.