



The Prodigal

Luke 15

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This is at the same time one of the most familiar, the most strange, and the most culturally pervasive of all Jesus' parables. It has even changed language.

Since we know it so well, I'm going to ask you to pull the Bibles out of your pew racks, and follow along with me as we walk through this story. While you're doing that, I'm going to give you a bit of background:

Ken Bailey is a renowned New Testament scholar. A large part of that renown comes from this chapter in Luke, and the book he wrote about his research into it.

You see, Ken Bailey isn't just a Greek scholar, which is what most New Testament scholars are; he knows Arabic, and is a diligent student of the *culture* of Jesus' world, which is, of course, Middle Eastern.

We have heard Jesus' stories for so long that not only do we tend to imagine them in our cultural context, the stories have themselves shaped our cultural context. What I mean by this is that if I tell you that so-and-so is a prodigal, you almost certainly think of a young person who's gone out and been beaten up by the world.

What Ken Bailey wanted to do was see what those stories might have meant to the people who heard them from Jesus' own lips. Now, right here I've got to tell you that this must have been one amazing afternoon for the people following Jesus around. In Luke's Gospel, he stands up and one right after another tells these incredible stories, these parables, three in a row: the lost coin, the lost sheep, and the prodigal. Each of these is immensely powerful; each is worthy of a long, careful analysis and discussion. And yet Jesus just rattles them off.

Today our focus is only on the last, the prodigal. Ken Bailey, nearly fifty years ago, went out into the small villages of Palestine, armed with Jesus' parables and his knowledge of Arabic, and talked to people: he told them Jesus' stories.

Now these villages back then weren't really all that much different from Jesus' day. The old men – the elders – still sat at the entrance to town, talking among themselves, passing on tradition and judging petty local arguments – exactly like every village in Jesus' time.

He would come up to them, introduce himself, and work his way into the group. Not an easy process, and it took a good bit of time. But once he was in, he would tell them a parable.

Now he didn't say where it came from: he'd just tell them the story. And he was shocked.

They would laugh when he talked about serious matters. They'd get angry at things we might think amusing. They were furious about the prodigal story.

So, let's start: There was a father who had two sons – lucky man! The youngest asked his father for his inheritance. Right now, the elders at the village are dumbfounded. Why? Because this young man has just told his father that he wants him dead. That's how you get an inheritance! Moreover, the youngest son isn't entitled to it, anyway. This is a powerful insult. The Law of Moses said it was okay to kill a child that disrespectful – and Bailey's elders, while not willing to go that far, were certainly ready to kick him out of town!

But the father divides his property between them – each son gets a share. He has submitted to his younger son's request, and while the older brother is getting somewhat shortchanged, Dad is now living on his son's farm.

So, the younger son turns his share into cash, and heads off who knows where, to spend everything he has – everything his father had passed on to him, and what had also belonged to his brother.

He found some work, but not even enough to survive – in a famine, you feed the livestock first! He's not even ashamed to be working with the pigs. Again, Ken Bailey's elders spat in disgust. This son has no dignity, no honor, no sense of right and wrong at all: better to starve than work with pigs!

Then, the younger son “came to his senses” – as Joni Mitchell famously sung, “you don't know what you've got till it's gone” – and realized he had to come home. But he knew it would never be home: he had no right to claim anything. Nothing. He would make himself a slave, just so he could eat and have a place to live.

So he rehearses this grand-sounding speech, plumbing the depths of self-degradation and humility: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no long worthy to be called your son.” Sounds great! But the elders again are beside themselves with fury: “Who is he who hates his father so much that he throws his disrespect in his face?” To them, the son is dead; dead since he wished his father dead, dead since he left – dead even to God once he started working with the pigs. To turn up living is even more insult to the already devastated father.

And we know what happens, don't we? Dad welcomes back the prodigal, and all's well, even if the older son is upset.

This has caused a lot of anguish over the years. Fathers and sons, mothers and daughters who've found themselves fighting each other and searching for forgiveness have agonized over the events of their families, wondering what they could have done different, wondering why they couldn't have swallowed their pride like the Dad, or admitted their mistakes, like the son.

I'm one of them; I enjoyed my college years as a gift, rather than a trust; did what I wanted, not what could have been best. Nothing like this story, but bad enough; I even called myself "the prodigal" when I called home. I learned to feel guilt for wasting what they gave me so freely.

But that's wrong. I don't mean my sadness over my folly; I mean this whole reading of the story.

This must be perfectly clear: this story is NOT about you or me or our families: it is about GOD. And it is embarrassingly graphic.

For Jesus, the father is God, and the older brother is the people of Israel, the younger, those who've fallen away from their Abrahamic heritage.

And that's another part of what make Ken Bailey's elders so mad: God just doesn't act like God. God doesn't even act like any self-respecting father! He takes his son's insults, one after the other, and rather than turning his head and spitting every time someone mentions his name, he runs – RUNS! – out to meet this twerp as he comes straggling home.

No adult male ever runs in public in Jesus' world. It just isn't done. But God runs.

And so our language has changed. "Prodigal", you see, means "extremely, even foolishly generous." We use it to identify the black sheep, the wanderer, the one who never gets it right: the truth is, the generous one, the one who always gets it right by the Kingdom of God's rules, is God himself.

God is willing to make a fool of himself to get you back, right now. Will you come, or will you go back out and starve?