

God rejoices over one sinner who returns: To be more precise, we have to change metaphors. God is here a mirror reflecting the joy of the person who is found.

sources: Luke 15:1-3; Matthew 18:12; Luke 15:5ff., 8-11

THE GOSPEL

ACCORDING

TO JESUS

*A New Translation and Guide
To His Essential Teachings
For Believers and Unbelievers*

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The Prodigal Son

The heart of Jesus' teaching, and one of the most beautiful stories ever told. The final, overjoyed statement by the father—"For this son of mine was dead, and he has come back to life; he was lost, and is found"—is the only kind of resurrection that Jesus ever spoke about.

And he said, "There once was a man who had two sons. And the younger one said to him, 'Father, let me have my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. And not many days afterward, having turned his share into money, the younger son left and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his inheritance in riotous living. And after he had spent it all, a severe famine arose in that country; and he was destitute. And he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his farm to feed the pigs. And he longed to fill his belly with the husks that the pigs were eating; and no one would give him any food. And when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough to eat, while I am dying of hunger. I will get up and go to my father, and say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against God and against you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Let me be like one of your hired men.''" And he got up, and went to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him, and was moved with compassion, and ran to him, and threw

his arms around him, and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against God and against you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Quick, bring out the best robe we have and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and sandals on his feet. And bring the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat and make merry. For this son of mine was dead, and he has come back to life; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to make merry.

"Now the older son had been out in the fields; and on his way home, as he got closer to the house, he heard music and dancing, and he called over one of the servants and asked what was happening. And the servant said, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has him back safe and sound.' And he was angry and would not go in. And his father came out and tried to soothe him; but he said, 'Look: all these years I have been serving you, and never have I disobeyed your command. Yet you never even gave me a goat, so that I could feast and make merry with my friends. But now that this son of yours comes back, after eating up your money on whores, you kill the fatted calf for him! And the father said to him, 'Child, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But it was proper to make merry and rejoice, for your brother was dead, and he has come back to life; he was lost, and is found.'"

There once was a man who had two sons: It would be more accurate to call this "The Parable of the Loving Father and His Two Sons," since in this context its subject is not the younger son but the older son's reception of him.

he divided his property: The older son was entitled to a double portion (Deuteronomy 21:17); thus his share would have been two-thirds of the property.

The legal position was as follows: there were two ways in which property might pass from father to son: by a will, or by a gift during the life of the father. In the latter case, the rule was that the beneficiary obtained possession of the capital immediately, but the interest on it only became available upon the death of the father. That means: in the case of a gift during the father's lifetime, (a) the son obtains the right of possession (the

land in question, for example, cannot be sold by the father), (b) but he does not acquire the right of disposal (if the son sells the property the purchaser can take possession only upon the death of the father), and (c) he does not acquire the usufruct, which remains in the father's unrestricted possession until his death. This legal position is correctly depicted in the parable when the elder brother is indicated as the sole future owner, but nevertheless the father continues to enjoy the usufruct.

(Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, pp. 128f.)

squandered his inheritance in riotous living: Near the end of the parable, the older son says that the younger son has come back "after eating up your money on whores" (we aren't meant to ask how he found out). The image is of someone who has been reckless and self-indulgent, so swinishly devoted to food and sex that he ends up in an actual pigsty.

The younger son, though he has sinned grievously, is not truly wicked; he is the kind of sinner that a prostitute is, but not wicked like a rapist or a murderer. We aren't told that he has injured other people; he has only cheapened his own life and injured himself. This means that no restitution is necessary and that the father's forgiveness can be simultaneous with the son's repentance.

It would be a different situation if while he was in the distant country he had robbed the poor, murdered his enemies, and committed adultery with his best friend's wife. In that case, the consequences of his sins would have been far more serious, and even sincere repentance would not have been enough, although it would have been a necessary prelude to complete restitution. In fact, for this situation the appropriate parable would be more like the parable of the Lost Son in the Lotus Sutra. In that parable the son is so lost and degraded that he can't "come to himself"; he has forgotten that he is the son of a rich man, and when he happens to wander back to his father's town, he doesn't even know it, doesn't even recognize his father, and is terrified when his father's servants come for him. The father, overjoyed to find his son but heartsick at how low

he has sunk, realizes that the truth will be too great a shock for him, and treats him like a mental patient or a wild animal. Over many years, in tiny, gradual stages, he tames him and restores him to the status of a responsible, moral human being. First he gives him a job cleaning manure, then, after several years, a raise and more responsibility, then he makes him a manager, then his chief steward. Finally, twenty years later, when the son is ready, the father summons him to the palace, tells him his true identity, and makes him his heir.

to feed the pigs: An especially degrading job for a Jew.

the husks that the pigs were eating: Literally, “carob pods,” which were eaten only by animals and the very poor.

when he came to himself: By realizing what he has done, he becomes himself again—not his true self, but a truer self. This is a very difficult stage of spiritual growth, since the first thing clarity gives rise to is great shame:

... the rending pain of re-enactment
Of all that you have done, and been; the shame
Of motives late revealed, and the awareness
Of things ill done and done to other's harm
Which once you took for exercise of virtue.

(T. S. Eliot, “Little Gidding,” *Collected Poems 1909–1962*,
Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1963, p. 204)

During this purgatorial stage one is able to burn away a great deal of painful karma. That is why the Buddhists insist that the pain be faced without any palliatives, and why they adopt as their fifth precept the vow not to cloud the mind with any kind of intoxicant or comfort, including religion.

How many of my father's hired men: Since he is starving, his first thought is of his belly. But he also realizes how actively stupid he has been. As a Hasidic rabbi once said, “Never forget that you are the son of a king.”

I will get up and go to my father: He has not sunk so low in his self-esteem that he is ashamed to appear before his father.

Father: This is the first word he thinks of saying, and the only word he needs to say. It is already enough.

I have sinned against God and against you: In sinning against himself.

I am no longer worthy to be called your son: Here he shows a touching honesty with himself.

It is important to understand how and when a statement like this is appropriate. For the younger son, in his dawning awareness, the statement is simply a recognition of how morally corrupt he has become. It is not meant to be held up as a pattern of humility, as it is in the “Lord, I am not worthy” of the Mass. At a later stage of spiritual growth, it is just as essential to be able to admit, “I am worthy to be called your son.”

And he got up, and went to his father: We don't know how many days or months it took him to arrive from the “distant country.” Jesus has compressed the time into this one sentence, as if, once the younger son has come to himself and made his decision, all time disappears.

while he was still a long way off: The Midrash tells the following parable about repentance:

The son of a king was a hundred days' journey away from his father. His friends said to him, “Return to your father.” He said, “I can't, I'm too far away.” His father sent to him and said, “Go as far as you can, and I will come the rest of the way to you.” Thus the Holy One, blessed be he, said to Israel, “Return to me, and I will return to you” (Malachi 3:7).

his father saw him: Even from a great distance he immediately recognizes him.

and was moved with compassion:

This is no ideal picture of an imaginary father, of such exceptional saintliness that he can stand for God himself. He is *any*

father worth the name, as the hearers are expected to recognize, and this is how he would behave; and that is what God is like.

(Dodd, *Founder of Christianity*, p. 60)

and ran to him:

A most unusual and undignified procedure for an aged oriental, even though he is in such haste.

(Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, p. 130)

bring out the best robe: The son is treated as the guest of honor.

was dead: Spiritually dead, as when Jesus says, "Let the dead bury their dead" (Matthew 8:22, Luke 9:60).

the older son: The older son is a figure for the ordinary pious person, not for the truly righteous. He is a good man, but not a wise one; that is, he obeys God's word, but the word hasn't become flesh. Of this kind of person Lao-tzu says:

When the great Tao is forgotten,
goodness and piety appear.

(chapter 18)

he was angry: Professor Dodd thinks, as do most Christian scholars, that the pious "are slyly satirized in the figure of the smug elder brother ('I never once disobeyed your orders!')." But the elder brother is telling the truth, and we are meant to believe him literally, when he says he has never disobeyed his father's command; in a traditional culture, a good son wouldn't even dream of disobedience. Nor is he being at all smug. He feels he has been treated unjustly, and he is speaking from a sense of deep hurt and resentment. After all, he has done everything right, yet he has never felt accepted in the way that he sees his no-good brother being accepted. This is a dangerous situation, as when Cain's offering of fruits is rejected, and it calls for all the father's understanding and love.

Here we mustn't pay too close attention to the details of the parable. Realistically, the father has been thoughtless: even in his great joy, he should have had the presence of mind to send

one of the servants to call the older son home; there was certainly enough time for that while the fatted calf was being roasted. And during all the years when the older son was being so dutiful, couldn't the father, just once, have given him a goat so that he could feast with his friends? Half a goat? A few chickens? There is a further consideration: Wasn't the father ever aware of the son's dissatisfaction, or concerned that he was working from a sense of duty rather than love? An insightful father would have addressed this problem immediately and not let it fester.

But we aren't meant to listen in this way. The point here is that there are pious people who are feeling hurt and resentful that a repentant sinner has been forgiven and reinstated. How can Jesus help them understand? What can the father say to the older son that will allow him to break free of his resentment and accept his younger brother with open arms?

tried to soothe him: One of the marks of an authentic saying of Jesus is its tolerance and freedom from blame or rancor. We never find a character acting this way in the church's parables. For example, in Luke's version of the parable of the Great Supper (14:16ff.), after the invited guests beg off, the master of the house becomes enraged and vows that none of them will ever taste his banquet (Matthew 22:2ff. is even more violent and punitive).

Child: Such tenderness.

you are always with me: I acknowledge that you have never left me.

But it was proper: Because he has truly risen from the dead.

The father's statement is as simple as it is profound. He says exactly the same thing to his son and heir as he said to the servants. He is too moved to speak anything but essence.