

JESUS THE PRODIGAL SON Luke 15:11-16, 20-24

When I was in seminary years ago (ok, it wasn't *that* long ago), one of my professors told us that we should preach the prodigal son once a year, it's that important for us to remember. The presentation of God's love in the Gospel is so beautifully and deeply presented, that we do well to have it continually set before us. It's such a famous story, that even people who don't read the Bible are familiar with the story. As you read it, try to listen with new ears.

Not long ago I was talking with a woman about her cheating husband and what we both knew was an impending divorce. I wanted so much to say to her, "I understand what you're going through." But the truth was that I couldn't really understand. I could sympathize but I couldn't really identify. Some of the hardest times in my life have been counseling young couples who've lost babies. I'll never forget sitting with one couple who had given birth to a stillborn child and the nurse bringing the baby in for one last look. I would have been lying if I had said, "I know how you feel," because I don't, I've never had that happen to me.

But, you know, I've been on the other side of that kind of hurt and disappointment. I've felt at times that I was in a unique situation, that nobody could understand where I was coming from. Maybe you're there, maybe you've experienced disappointment; with life, with death, with others, with yourself. Sometimes it's to the point of despair.

Let me say this, and I don't want to sound flippant. The Bible is a source of comfort. As a religious text, it's unparalleled in showing us real people with real disappointment. You want to talk about disappointed and hurting people read about Joseph, whose brothers sold him into slavery and who was continually betrayed by people in spite of being a really good guy. Read about Jeremiah, whose own family turned against him, along with everyone else, because he was the prophet of bad news. Read about Paul, unparalleled as a church planter and evangelist, yet continually beaten and imprisoned. Not only that, but he had enormous struggles with sin and frustration himself. Read about Jesus.

Glenn Hoberg, a PCA pastor in Washington DC once said, "Some religious traditions will minimize disappointment and sufferings, say it's only an illusion, others will say it's all your fault. But in the Bible you actually find company for genuinely disappointed people, you can find a voice there... That's is why it's so sad when Christians can't be as honest as the Bible. They convey the idea that God isn't up to that sort of thing, which He is."

As we come to the prodigal son parable, we find a story that was made up (probably not an actual, historical happening) but that nevertheless illustrates real truth and sheds some light on disappointments. And as we interpret the parable, we need to be guided by something that Jesus said after His resurrection: "Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself." (Luke 24:27) In other words, Jesus is at the center of every passage in Scripture. A lot of us were raised thinking that Jesus is only in the New Testament, but He's really everywhere in Scripture, fully revealed in the New, but foreshadowed, hidden, and given in types in the Old Testament. Who is Jesus in the story of the lost

son? There are really only 5 characters, so we can rule out the older brother, the drinking and whoring friends, and the servant. Usually, the father is understood as Christ, and we gain a lot from the perspective about God's love and forgiveness.

But what about the prodigal himself?

How could Jesus be the prodigal? Was He sinful? We read in the New Testament that Christ was 'tempted in everyway, yet without sin.' Even those who don't believe that testimony about Him usually admit that He was at least a very good person, and I don't know anyone who is brave enough to cast Christ as a drunkard and a whoremonger. No, He wasn't sinful. But I believe we can see Him in the prodigal, and there are two keys to our interpretations: The first is in Paul's writings. In 2 Corinthians 5:21 Paul is explaining the significance of the crucifixion and resurrection, "For our sake he made him *to be sin* who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." There was a great exchange that took place, God placed our sins on the righteous and sinless Jesus and gave us His goodness and perfect record. It would be like if one of us were in debt up to our eyeballs and we exchanged bank accounts with Donald Trump.

The second key we get is in the words of the father, "My son was dead and is alive again." A figure of speech? Maybe, but the words are repeated again in verse 32. Jesus seems to want to shed more light on His death and resurrection.

What's the point here? **Jesus' death was an identification, not an example.**

Many people have tried to claim that Jesus' death was merely a good example of the kind of sacrificial love that we should have for each other, after all what greater love is there than to lay down your life for a friend? And there is something to that, but if that's all the crucifixion was, my question is, how is that a good moral example? Think about it- if you lay down your life for someone, that means you are saving them. If Jesus' death doesn't save, how is it good? If there is no atonement for others, it becomes just about an innocent man who is executed on trumped-up charges, but ostensibly dying for his own sins. Think of it this way: if my daughter were playing in the street and a car come cruising towards her and I jumped in front of it, saving her but giving up my life in the process, you would say that was a good thing for me to do, right? But what if I were walking with my daughter, turned to her and said, 'Baby, I love you,' and then jumped out into oncoming traffic and died. What would you say? That would be foolish and not good if I gave up my life when nobody was in danger.

If Jesus' death is merely an example, I wouldn't be in church, I could just as well be home watching *Saving Private Ryan* or any number of war documentaries of people giving up their lives for others. The real question is, does Jesus' death have any significance for me, in American in 2005? Did He battle sin and death on my behalf or did He just die in a sweet, dramatic way?

Christ became sin for us. And it was more than physical suffering; it was the greatest spiritual suffering. In the movie *The Passion of the Christ*, they physical sufferings of Jesus are brutally displayed, but he's not the only person to have suffered a brutal death, or even to be innocently executed. But we get a hint of the real suffering when Jesus says, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me." Because, right there we realize that a holy God cannot look on sin, in fact He hates evil, and so He must have somehow turned His back on His own Son. The full wrath of God was poured out on Jesus that day. *All the curses of the Old Testament were put on Christ on the cross.*

Read some of the punishments in the book of Leviticus, being cast out from your people, being stoned, spotless, innocent animals being slaughtered because of our sin. All of that, all the terrors of hell were placed on Jesus on the cross. But then He was accepted by the Father, as this story tells us and as Paul says in Philippians 2, "Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow..." And because Jesus made a way to the Father's arms, now we are given access to the Father's embrace and His glory. This is the significance of the resurrection: death is not the end, but glory in the Father is for those who have placed their trust in Christ.

Friend, do you think you're alone, that nobody understands how you've been lost or devastated by the effects of sin? Jesus left His Father's throne and was numbered among the wicked for your sake. He understands, He identifies with your every sorrow and disappointment. Do you think that your life and sin are too much to bear? They are! That's why someone had to bear them for you. The message of Easter is of God coming to identify and suffer for His people. Yes, we still suffer but only in a small way comparatively. The cross and resurrection are a foretaste, a deposit so to speak, and a guarantee that one day all of our suffering will cease and we will only know love, joy and peace.