

# Meditations on the Parables of Mercy – 3



## The Forgiving Father & the 'prodigal' and 'dutiful' sons

**J**esus said, "There was a man who had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of property that falls to me." And he divided his living between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living. And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants.'" And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father said to his servants, "Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found." And they began to make merry.

'Now his elder son was in the field; and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what this meant. And he said to him, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound." But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, "Lo, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!" And he said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"

## Behind the Story Contextual background

This is one of the only times we hear the word 'prodigal'. Its basic meaning is wasteful, particularly with regard to money. It comes from the Latin roots 'forth' (pro) and to 'drive' (agere) it indicates a person who spends recklessly. Normally the younger son would only receive one-third of the Father's inheritance in accord with Old Testament Law in Deuteronomy (21:17). In the Jewish Law to ask for his inheritance was like saying to the father 'I wish you were dead.' The eldest son represents the Jewish leaders, who expected rewards for the duties they carried out. For the Father to run and embrace the son would be highly undignified in the Jewish culture, where the Patriarch never made the first move.

## Way In... Initial Reflections

(5 minutes)

### A Father's Unconditional Love, Mercy and Forgiveness

In this third parable devoted to mercy, Jesus reveals the nature of God as that of a Father who never gives up until he has forgiven the wrong and overcome rejection with compassion, mercy and everlasting love.

Jesus tells the story of two sons, the 'prodigal' and the 'dutiful'. At different times in our lives we experience both the 'prodigal' and the dutiful in ourselves. There are times when 'we go our own way' when we feel that 'we know what is best' only to experience the loss of our loving relationship with the Father. At other times we simply act out of duty and feel we merit reward for the good works we have done, or recognition from the one whose orders we have obeyed. Work becomes a Law and not a Love.

This parable takes us further than the lost coin and the lost sheep, it

essentially about our loving relationship with God, and the choice to refuse to 'remain' in that love and to 'want more' like the youngest son when he asks the Father for his inheritance ahead of time. Only when he 'comes to his senses' starved of food but even more starved of the love, he decides to return 'home', to the overwhelming love of the Father who is constantly waiting.

But what about the elder son 'within us' there are times when we simply remain faithful to duty and service, and obey the rules. Can you recognise yourself in the older son too? But the Father's love reaches out to both, his love mercy and forgiveness is for all peoples. He does in fact lose both sons, one in a 'foreign country' and the other in the 'prison of self-righteousness'. The call to us is to recognise our wanderings, accept that we are lost and 'let ourselves be found' and

receive with joy the ring, the sandals the robe of forgiveness and celebrate.

## Digging Deeper (15 min)

How often do we find ourselves seeking independence and exploring what it means to be self-sufficient, 'we take life into our own hands'. The mysterious thing is that God leaves us completely free 'to do our own thing', which is sometimes against his desire for us. The Father gives 'freely' what the younger son feels is his 'right' and lets him experience the loss of love, he doesn't interfere or prevent him. With the older son he also 'let's him be', because God can never force us to love him, even though his love for us never changes.

Both sons in very different ways experience what the 'real' love of the Father is. 'All that I have is yours.' It is a love without condition. Each son discovers that to love God we need to enter into a loving relationship, of son and father. It is a choice. Both sons are lost and in need of forgiveness - the prodigal Son' for taking what was not his, and the dutiful son for seeing life as an obligation and then judging both the Father and his brother on his return. Note the lack of relationship between the 'dutiful son' and his father when he calls his father 'you' and speaking. Both sons experience what it means to be starved of love. One enters into the joy mercy and forgiveness of the Father, the other remains imprisoned. But the Father never ceases to invite to the celebration, his heart is full of love and forgiveness for all.

Sometimes it is difficult to enter 'into the joy' of another but the invitation remains. The conversation the Father has with the dutiful son reveals the love he has for him, trying to help him understand, yet respecting and leaving him free.

## Inside-Out (10 min)

How does this reflect your daily life?

Do you remember a time when you have been 'lost' and 'found'?

With which of the two sons do you feel you most identify and why?

Imagine yourself returning back home to the Father, what will you say?

Have you ever found yourself refusing the invitation to celebrate in the joy of someone you know well?

The celebration is ready. Are you ready to enter into the joy of your Father?

How does it feel to receive the robe, the ring, the sandals?

Do you sometimes 'act out of duty' looking for approval?

## Inside the Text (10 min)

Re-read the passage and ponder...

What do the words 'lost' and 'found' mean to you?

Do you ever use these words in conversation with others?

Ask yourself what it means 'to be dying of hunger'.

Try to imagine the Father's feelings when he sees the son on his way home.

How do you understand the phrase 'My son was dead and has come back to life'?

What is the signification of the best robe the sandals, and the ring?

### Ponder the Words '

My son, you are with me always  
And all I have is yours'

How does it feel to see the Father 'moved with pity' and come running towards you?

## Pray a Psalm (10 min)

Slowly read through the verses from Psalm 102 (103) and ponder what the psalm adds to the overall picture. How do we experience the embrace of the Father's love knowing that each one of us is unconditionally accepted and our sins forgiven?

*My soul, give thanks to the Lord,  
all my being bless his holy name.*

*My soul, give thanks to the Lord  
and never forget all his blessings.*

*It is he who forgives all your guilt,  
who heals every one of your ills,  
who redeems your life from the grave,  
who crowns you with love  
and compassion,*

*who fills your life with good things,  
renewing your youth like an eagle's*

*The Lord does deeds of justice,  
gives judgment for all who are oppressed.  
He made known his ways to Moses  
and his deeds to Israel's sons.*

*The Lord is compassion and love,  
slow to anger and rich in mercy.*

*His wrath will come to an end;  
he will not be angry for ever.*

*He does not treat us according to our sins  
nor repay us according to our faults.*



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