

## THE THREE PRODIGALS

Youth for Christ rallies were very big when I was a teenager; they were the place to be on Saturday evening or Sunday afternoon. There was always good music, great singing, a lot of laughs, and a kind of mini talent show. The speakers were usually from out of town and enjoyed some level of celebrity status, which gave the rallies a special kind of mystique. What a place for fresh-faced church kids to go and have some fun and do some serious evangelism at the same time.

And occasionally the evangelist was someone boasting a shadowy past. Naturally his past would be featured prominently in the promotional material and all those kids who had been sheltered from that kind of life would feel a tug of curiosity while at the same time be encouraged to bring someone to the rallies who was being pulled toward an unsavoury or rebellious lifestyle. The rallies would begin with a lot of great singing and other talent which would lead up to the presentation of the featured speaker.

This kind of speaker was then presented and the introduction would give as much attention to his lurid past as to his redeemed present. He would follow, often with a series of funny one-liners and then move on to the burden of his message. It would begin with vivid and colourful accounts of his youthful exploits, wasted years, but exciting enough to make us sheltered farm kids raised in Christian homes wonder secretly whether there wasn't something really exciting that we had missed and been denied, especially since we knew the story would turn out all right.

The text of choice would often be Luke 15, the story of the Prodigal Son, editions of the Bible even captioning the story that way. Much of the attention would be on the waywardness of the son, and eventually, the open-hearted forgiveness of the father and very little attention to the rest of the story. But with the captions in the Bible and the frequent attention given to the dissolute behaviour of the son, the original meaning of the word "prodigal" has degenerated to the way we use it today, a meaning totally given over to describe dissolute and rebellious behaviour. But the original meaning is beautiful and even-handed; it means "lavish", "recklessly extravagant", "giving or yielding profusely". This, of course, could be both good or bad, but over time we have given it an exclusively bad connotation. So the caption "prodigal son" has lured us into giving undeserving attention to the lurid, deflected us from revelling in the expansive grace of the father, and imprisoned the real message Jesus was delivering to that audience and to us.

But to get to the heart of the central point Jesus was making we have to go back to the setting described at the beginning of the chapter. Aristotle has told us that a good writer must always keep his audience in mind. Jesus, the master story-teller knew this better even than Aristotle did and He had exactly this in mind when he told this story. He had a divided audience; there were "sinners" who were the non-conformist outcasts from the establishment, and there were "scribes and Pharisees"; but it was the latter who were complaining that Jesus was too generous with His time when it came to the "sinners"; He was enjoying them far too much! Luke includes details to show specifically that Jesus told the three parables of chapter 15 to make an irritating point to the Pharisees. They simply could not enjoy watching others being forgiven, so Jesus first told them two short stories: the stories of the lost coin and the lost sheep that were found, both of which highlighted the great joy in heaven when the lost are found. Then followed the story of the two alienated sons, a story with implied reference to the two sides of his audience.

The story of the younger son was like red meat for the Pharisees. They would see him as the non-conforming new kid on the block like the publicans who collaborated with the Romans; he indulged in all of his desires; he refused to be part of the "system"; he was an unreasonable demander without participating, and since he was willing to herd swine the Pharisees would see him as unclean as the Romans.

But he had some attractive, if not endearing, qualities. His leaving of his father's household, while clearly an act of rejecting his father's lordship, does not show open hostility with his father. He is a congenial rebel who wins friends easily (as long as he has money) and spends his resources very liberally, wasting it extravagantly. He is extravagant (prodigal) with his demands of his father, he is prodigal in his sense of adventure, he is prodigal in the way he spends his resources, and then, almost charmingly, he is prodigal in his memory of his father. He has not so much wasted his father's money, but more seriously, his father's generosity, his love, and his desire for a family fellowship. But Jesus does not spend time on lurid details about the son's exploits; He says simply that he spent his time and money on "riotous living." There was no need to go into detail, since the Pharisees already "knew" that the younger son, like the publicans, was the real sinner. It is the obnoxious older brother who paints in the details: "this your son (who has) devoured your wealth with harlots,..." Clearly, Jesus wants his audience, and mainly the pharisees to catch the parallels he is drawing.

Meanwhile, this other brother who, as the "sinners" would clearly see, had attributes and attitudes that matched that other group in Jesus' audience, the Pharisees and scribes. The older brother was just as prodigal as the younger, only in a different way. The younger one dissipated his wealth extravagantly with no return to show for it; the older brother hoarded it feverishly in ways that demanded full return. To have a party was a waste; to kill the prize calf in honour of a "no-good" was sheer insanity. He was a member of the establishment, had always been, had made sure that the establishment was secure and prospered. This kind of hoarding prodigality was sterile and just as destructive as the spendthrift prodigality of the younger brother. But it had the added atmosphere of cold alienation attached to it. Interestingly, when the younger brother decides to return he longs for his father, but makes no mention of his brother; he doesn't seem to miss him at all. When he comes home, he is no more anxious to see the older brother than the older brother is to meet him. So the older brother lived there, but wouldn't enter the house; he talked to the servants rather than to the father. He was incapable of enjoying a celebration, especially one marking the reconciliation of the younger son to the father; forgiveness was foreign to him. This home had all the ingredients of alienation, a dysfunctional family with a father yearning for wholeness in relationships.

Philip Yancey in one of his excellent books tells the story of a woman in Chicago who was broken: broken in spirit, in her body, and in her way of living. She had a small child and was caring for it and herself by living the life of a prostitute. Desperate about her life, she went for help to a counsellor. After hearing her pour out her heart and talking to her for a while, the counsellor finally said, "Have you ever thought of going to church?" The lady looked at the counsellor in total shock and astonishment and said, "Whatever for would I do that? I feel bad enough already!" Doesn't that go to the heart of what Jesus is trying to convey to the scribes and Pharisees? Their mission was to make people who already felt sinful, to feel even more guilty and alienated. So when Jesus described the behaviour of the older son, they could not help but see the parallel.

So if we focus on the rebelliousness of the younger "prodigal" son, we miss the point that Jesus is trying to make. His target audience, since they had raised the original complaint, is the disgruntled Pharisees. They were the ones who had raised the matter of Jesus' pleasure at spending time with "sinners" and had already decided that, because of nonconformity to their rules, these people were the real sinners.

Now, if the younger son was prodigal in his spendthrift rebellion and the older son was prodigal in his greed, neither could match the prodigality of the father in his matchless extravagance in giving away forgiveness and reconciliation. He wasted his love and affection on both sons even when they didn't return it and he still had plenty to spare. It is astonishing to us who are quick to look for accountability that the father in this story doesn't ask for any. When the younger son wants his share, the father gives it to him without argument; there is no "are you sure you're doing the right thing; are you sure you know what you're doing?" When he wants to leave, the

father evidently just lets him go, seemingly without an argument--just lets him go. While he is gone, the father "wastes" his time longing for and looking for his son's return. And when the son does return totally wrung out, there is no "What have you done with what I gave you?" There is only one thing on his mind--reconciliation and inclusion, and then celebration. It is so easy to enjoy disciplining the erring more than restoring them.

And then he goes out to meet the older brother in the same spirit. It should not go without notice that when the younger son returns, the father talks consistently about his "son" who has returned. But when he talks to his older son, he says with great emphasis, "this brother of yours"; this conjunction of intimate kinship and the cold alienation of the older brother's response would not have been lost on the Pharisees. Clearly, Jesus is telling them that these whom they have labelled as "sinners" because they were non-conformists, were actually their brothers even though they were not followers of the "system".

Because the story is so rich in appropriate details, and because it is so easy to identify with either one of the brothers, it is easy to think it is mostly about them. But it isn't about them at all; it's all about the father; He is the centrepiece that provides the action of the story; He takes the initiative; his exuberant inclusiveness is so great he wants to bring them both in. He is the one who throws the party and wants the alienated opposites to join in. His resources of love and forgiveness are so great that that the combined waywardness of the two sons could never exhaust them! His storehouses of grace are so boundless they cover all their sins and rebellion and will embrace that rebellion with inclusiveness and create a spirit that cannot resist throwing a great party.

Now, it would be dangerous to make a good story take on meanings that were not intended when Jesus told it. It would be dangerous to infer that Jesus never does require accountability. But the most inspiring point of this story, as with all three of the stories in this chapter, is that there is great joy in heaven when any sinner repents. It is God's "property always to have mercy." The first two short stories deal very little with the details of waywardness, but a great deal with rejoicing in redemption. It is this divine hilarity when Heaven watches sinners experiencing forgiveness that inspired the telling of the story in the first place - the fact that Jesus actually enjoyed the company of "sinners". Anytime we lose that sense of delight, anytime we question the sincerity of a spiritual transaction, anytime we lose the sense of wonder of redemption, it is then time to re-visit with awe the prodigious celebration that takes place in heaven when a soul is snatched from the enemy, even when it happens in a way unfamiliar to us and in the company of others.

All of which begs the question, "Why are we so quick to strike committees for disciplining the errant and so slow to initiate a plan for orderly and generous restoration?" I know there is an implied assumption that discipline leads to restoration, but how much evidence is there to justify that assumption. A friend of mine and I were discussing the experience of a pastor who had "fallen", had then undergone a rigorous period of accountability with responsible leaders, and had grace extended to him by his congregation who restored him to his original ministry. In spite of all this, my friend said something like, "Well, I guess I won't be reading his books anymore." So I said, "Well, then you better not read the Psalms either." She came up short, and both of us realised how quickly we're attracted to rejection rather than restoration. While the Father scans the horizon looking for His opportunity to demonstrate reconciliation and inclusion, we, almost by reflex, demonstrate "separation" and avoidance. "Good fences make good neighbours" seems to prevail.

In fact, there seems to be an innate disposition in all of us to behave this way. Even the disciples, after having had such a rich learning experience with our Lord, not too long before Jesus confronted the Pharisees and scribes with the joy in heaven, began to take this attitude. Luke records in Ch. 9 that John approached Jesus to say, "Master, we saw someone casting out demons **in your name**, (my emphasis) and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow us." But Jesus said to him, "Do not stop him; for whoever is not against you is for you." Strange. In all my many years of attending church, and hearing good sermons on almost every part of the

Bible, I think I have yet to hear a sermon on that exchange. And not too long after that rebuke, Jesus and the disciples went through a Samaritan village that would not receive them. Again, the disciples were ready to destroy them by calling fire down on them.

This, in spite of the fact that Jesus' life and ministry taught just the opposite. Perhaps it's because we read each of the accounts of his ministry or his stories and parables in isolation from each other and never look at the pattern they weave. In fact, so often His encounters forced these opposites into contact with each other: seemingly immediately after His baptism and great temptation He returned to Nazareth and went regularly to the synagogue **as was his custom**. From there He went to Capernaum, cured a man with an unclean spirit, cured him in the synagogue and after the service went to Simon Peter's house. Clearly he was comfortable enough and highly regarded enough to be one of the leaders of the synagogue while at the same time drawing those same people into circumstances and to people who were not part of the establishment.

He heals the leper and tells him, "Go show yourself to the priest." Does that mean Jesus' validated a system so rife with corruption? Instead, does it not suggest that not all the priests were corrupt and that their office could actually perform a useful ministry, if only they would risk contact with the unclean. Jesus, rather than being fearful lest the healed leper be corrupted by the corrupt system at the Temple, insists that he be exposed to the priests. And on the other hand, he makes the priests face an encounter with the most ostracised member of society. Not bad for a day's work!

It seems that Jesus healed on the Sabbath and in the presence of the synagogue crowd often enough to make a point—the same point he was trying to make with His audience. When He told those three parables in Luke ch.15 He wanted the Pharisees to learn to rejoice in the forgiveness others have found even if it didn't fit their mould, to learn to overcome the suspicion that alienation from each other brings with it and begin to see each believing camp the way the Father sees us, that is, as sons and brothers. Above all, learn the incomprehensible reality that the only reason there is joy in heaven is that the Father's boundless love is always much greater than all our combined misdoings.

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