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**Title** Lost and Found: Pondering the Parable of the Prodigal Son

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**Abstract** The parable of the prodigal son is among the most beloved and consoling of the Savior's teachings. This literary masterpiece is essentially a distillation of God's plan of salvation, a sobering insight into human nature—men and women's tendency to stray, their inclination toward envy, the temptation to judge unrighteously. And yet towering above the condition of the two sons—each a prodigal in his own way—is the tender revelation of the waiting father, the actual hero of the story. His capacity to love without limits, to readily forgive, and to celebrate the return of a wandering child is as stunning as it is dramatically moving. It is, of course, a glimpse into the soul of God, our Heavenly Father.

# LOST AND FOUND: PONDERING THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON

Robert L. Millet

I am persuaded that what we have in the fifteenth chapter of Luke is in fact a distillation of the plan of salvation, a message within the Message, the gospel within the Gospel. The simple sermon of Luke 15 is deep and profound: God loves his children, all of them, and he will do everything in his power to save them. The Prophet Joseph Smith pointed out that “while one portion of the human race is judging and condemning the other without mercy, the Great Parent of the universe looks upon the whole of the human family with a fatherly care and paternal regard; He views them as His offspring, and without any of those contracted feelings that influence the children of men.”<sup>1</sup>

The introductory words of Luke 15 set the stage and provide the setting and interpretation for the parables that follow: “Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them. And he spake this parable unto them, saying . . .” (Luke 15:1-3). That’s it. That’s the background. The Master is surrounded by people who are despised by the upper

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This address, here revised and edited for publication, was delivered in September 2000 to the BYU Religious Education faculty.

1. *History of the Church*, 4:595.

crust of society and the religious establishment, and the pious ones remark, essentially, “If this man really were divine, if he really were the promised Messiah, the Holy One of Israel, surely he would not be found in the midst of such disgusting folk.”

Joseph Smith said:

In reference to the prodigal son, I said it was a subject I had never dwelt upon; that it was understood by many to be one of the intricate subjects of the scriptures; and even the Elders of this Church have preached largely upon it, without having any rule of interpretation. What is the rule of interpretation? Just no interpretation at all. Understand it precisely as it reads. *I have a key by which I understand the scriptures. I enquire, what was the question which drew out the answer, or caused Jesus to utter the parable? . . . To ascertain its meaning, we must dig up the root and ascertain what it was that drew the saying out of Jesus.*

While Jesus was teaching the people, all the publicans and sinners drew near to hear Him; “and the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them.” This is the keyword which unlocks *the parable of the prodigal son. It was given to answer the murmurings and questions of the Sadducees and Pharisees, who were querying, finding fault, and saying, “How is it that this man, as great as He pretends to be, eats with publicans and sinners?”*<sup>2</sup>

This now leads us to a deeper consideration of the parable of the prodigal son. Let us take this remarkable parable a piece at a time and seek to provide a brief commentary on the verses to help us to better understand what many believe to be the greatest of all parables.

## Commentary

*And he said, A certain man had two sons:*

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2. *History of the Church*, 5:261-62, emphasis added.

**two sons:** This parable may be divided into two parts, almost two parables; verses 11-24 deal with the younger son, and verses 25-32 deal with the older son.

*And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living.*

**give me the portion of goods that falleth to me:** The youngest son seems to have wanted his freedom. President David O. McKay noted that “the ‘younger son,’ we are told, . . . was immature in his judgment. He was irking under the restraint, and he rather resented the father’s careful, guiding eye. He evidently longed for so-called freedom, wanted, so to speak, to try his wings. . . . Here is a case of volition, here is choice, deliberate choice. Here is, in a way, rebellion against authority.”<sup>3</sup>

Here the youngest son comes to the father and asks that the property, presumably the land, be divided up. Under Jewish law a father just couldn’t leave his properties to whomever he wanted. He was required to leave a double portion to the elder son, in this case two-thirds to the elder son and one-third to the younger (Deuteronomy 21:17). But the division was not generally done until the father’s death. One researcher who lived in the Near East for many years has observed that if a son were to ask his father for his inheritance while the father were still alive, he would be implying that he wants his father to die, which would be both a devastating insult to the father and a serious transgression of cultural norms.<sup>4</sup>

**he divided unto them his living:** This doesn’t necessarily mean that he gave, at that time, the elder son his portion. In allotting to the younger son his one-third, the father was thereby allotting to the older son his two-thirds. The father is still in charge: he commands the servants (v. 22), orders the slaughter of the fatted calf (v. 23), and speaks of “all that I have” (v. 31).

3. David O. McKay, *Gospel Ideals* (Salt Lake City: The Improvement Era, 1953), 537.

4. Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 161-62.

*And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living.*

**[he] gathered all together:** This probably means that he sold the land and converted the inheritance into cash, something the boy was certainly within his legal rights to do, but something that stretched the moral law. Given the importance of land and of how, no doubt, the land was linked to the family, such a move would have been very painful for the family and even scandalous to the community.

**took his journey into a far country:** No doubt the young man traveled into the Diaspora, into a gentile land to which Jews had been scattered. The size of the Diaspora has been estimated at over four million, while the Palestinian population of Jews was half a million at the most.

**wasted his substance with riotous living:** We are not told what his sins were, only that he seems to have spent his inheritance quickly and frivolously. He would surely have had “friends” who were eager to help him spend his money but who disappeared quite suddenly when the funds were gone and thus when the fun was over.

*And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want.*

**a mighty famine . . . he began to be in want:** There is added to the problem of poverty the challenge of a famine. In a famine there is no food; people are starving. That is, not only did the boy run out of money, but he also had to reckon with an economic crisis. We don’t notice a famine as much when we have money, but we really feel it when we’re broke. Here he is, a lonely Jew in an alien nation. Aliens and outsiders inevitably acquire the worst jobs with the lowest pay.

*And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him.*

**joined himself to a citizen of that country:** Literally, the young man attached himself or “glued himself” to the man. Given his personal financial straits and also the economic condition of the country, any job looked good at the moment, anything that would keep body and spirit together.

**into his fields to feed swine:** The son took a job as a pig feeder, a task that was against all that he stood for. “At this point his status is that of an indentured servant—a status above that of a slave, but one that bound him by contract to work as a general laborer for his employer for a specified time. To feed pigs is degradation of the worst sort. Pigs are unclean animals in law and tradition (Lev 11:7; Deut 14:8; cf. Isa 65:4; 66:17; 1 Macc 1:47; cf. 2 Macc 6:18; 7:1). According to the *Mishnah*, from subsequent centuries, no one is allowed to rear swine, and according to the *Babylonian Talmud*, the person who does so is accursed.”<sup>5</sup> Truly, this was as low as a Jewish boy could descend.

**filled his belly with the husks . . . and no man gave unto him:** The boy was starving and would have eaten the carob nuts, the food of animals. As someone has observed, in one sense, “The very idea of wishing to be fed from the ‘pods’ eaten by pigs—and therefore being envious of the pigs!—but being refused, is even more degrading than the act of feeding the pigs itself.”<sup>6</sup>

Why did he not eat the nuts? Scholars are divided: Some suggest that he was utterly disgusted with the depths to which he had sunk and refused to eat animal food. Some state that this part of verse 16 implies that he would gladly have eaten the carob nuts, but the people would not give him any. If this latter explanation is true, it is tragically the case that he was beneath the pigs. The people in charge thus do not want to waste good pig food on a poor Jewish lad.

*And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father’s have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!*

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5. Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 75.

6. Hultgren, *Parables of Jesus*, 75.

**when he came to himself:** Literally, when he woke up, he came alive, realized his plight, and saw himself as he was.

When the wanderer comes to himself, “he remembers the other whom he wanted to push out of his world but to whom he found himself still belonging. . . . Through departure he wanted to become a ‘non-son’; *his return begins not with repentance but with something that makes the repentance possible—the memory of sonship. There is no coming to oneself without the memory of belonging.* The self has been constructed in relation to others, and it can come to itself only through relationship to others. The first link with the other in a distant country of broken relationships is memory.” In short, “For him whose project was to ‘un-son’ himself and who is still in a distant country, ‘sonship’ can only be a memory, but it is a memory that defines his present so much that it sets him on a journey back. The memory of sonship gives hope.”<sup>7</sup> As someone has observed, “The beginning of wisdom is to come to our senses and know the fearful truth about ourselves, that we have wandered and wasted our days in a distant country far from home.”<sup>8</sup>

*I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants.*

**I will arise:** It isn’t easy to “arise,” to repent. In fact, it takes a great deal of personal effort, coupled with divine strength, to choose to be changed, to work against the spiritual inertia so common in our fallen world. Repentance is not just a human work, not something we do completely on our own (see Acts 5:29-31; 11:18; 2 Timothy 2:23-25; Alma 34:14-15). In fact, “godly sorrow is a gift of the Spirit.”<sup>9</sup>

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7. Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 158-59, emphasis added.

8. Richard John Neuhaus, *Death on a Friday Afternoon: Meditations on the Last Words of Jesus from the Cross* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 4.

9. See Ezra Taft Benson, *The Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 72.

Once a wanderer hits bottom, particularly one who was taught better and has lived for a time in the light, it is fairly common for them to “come to themselves.” They realize what they once had, the “famine” for the word of truth in their own lives in terms of the present emptiness of their souls; deep within their hearts they begin to long for the sweet peace they once knew. Those who view themselves “in their own carnal state, even less than the dust of the earth” (Mosiah 4:2), feel the need to confess their sins and acknowledge their spiritual bankruptcy before God.

And what should the prodigal son expect from his father? From the community? Ridicule, rejection, verbal and perhaps even physical abuse? Surely during those agonizing moments of introspection and personal confrontation the wanderer must have reflected on what a return trip would mean in terms of “facing the music.” Surely he must have realized that the “righteous ones” in the community would demand that every ounce of justice be administered in as painful and humiliating a way as possible.

**I have sinned against heaven, and before thee:** How had he sinned against heaven (God) and against his father? He had broken the commandments of God set forth in the law of Moses. For one thing, he had not honored his father and mother (Exodus 20:12) but rather had brought heartbreak and anxiety and embarrassment to the whole family. He had humiliated his father in the community and caused him great grief and unnecessary worry.

**make me as one of thy hired servants:** There were three kinds of servants anciently: (1) bondsmen—these were slaves but were part of the estate, practically a member of the family; (2) servants or lower-class slaves—these were subordinate to the bondsmen; their life was harder but they were, to some degree, part of the estate and the family; (3) hired servants—these were hired hands, day laborers, temporary workers, outsiders who did not belong to the estate or the family and who might, without notice, be dismissed; they often lived in destitute conditions.

*And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.*

**And he arose, and came to his father:** It is worth noting that he came, not to the estate, not to the house, but to his father. He knew where he needed to go. He knew where he needed to begin.

**when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him:** Clearly, the father has been looking for his son for a long time, regularly and consistently going to the window, waiting for any word at all. While the parent of the wanderer need not be preoccupied with worry and distress, still every occasion for hope is grasped.

**and had compassion:** It would not be unusual for a parent to have become hardened to this wanderer and display an attitude of “show me” or “prove yourself” or “let’s don’t rush into this.” The mother and father might have concluded: “Let’s not make a big fuss over him because right now we just don’t know what to make of his return.” There had been too many emotional roller-coaster rides, too many tears, too many dashed hopes, too much pain for a reasonable parent to take any other attitude. “Even though the father has compassion on his son, a proper response for him would be to let the young man arrive home, fall on his knees, and ask for forgiveness. Then, in the best of all circumstances, the father would respond with words of forgiveness and a review of expectations. The son would, in effect, be on probation around home for a time; perhaps he could remain there until he could earn enough to leave as an independent person once again.”<sup>10</sup> Rather, the account simply states that the father “had compassion.”

**and ran:** In the Near East, for an elderly gentleman to run was disgraceful. He often had long, flowing robes, and in order to run he would need to roll up his robes, allowing people to see his naked legs. This would be humiliating; it would be “outlandish behavior.”<sup>11</sup> Kenneth Bailey reports:

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10. Hultgren, *Parables of Jesus*, 78.

11. Hultgren, *Parables of Jesus*, 78.

The father is fully aware of how his son will be treated, if and when he returns in humiliation to the village community he has rejected. What the father does in this homecoming scene can best be understood as a series of dramatic actions calculated to protect the boy from the hostility of the village and to restore him to fellowship within the community. These actions begin with the father running down the road.

An Oriental nobleman with flowing robes never runs anywhere. To do so is humiliating. . . . The text says, "He had compassion." We would suggest that this "compassion" specifically includes awareness of the gauntlet the boy will have to face as he makes his way through the village. The father then runs this gauntlet for him, assuming a humiliating posture in the process!

The father makes the reconciliation public at the edge of the village. Thus his son enters the village under the protective care of the father's acceptance. The boy, having steeled his nerves for this gauntlet, now, to his utter amazement, sees his father run it for him. Rather than experiencing the ruthless hostility he deserves and anticipates, the son witnesses an unexpected, visible demonstration of love in humiliation. The father's acts replace speech. There are no words of acceptance and welcome. The love expressed is too profound for words. Only acts will do.<sup>12</sup>

So why did the father run? Because he was overjoyed to see his son. Because he had feared that his beloved was dead. Because the father was filled with love and compassion. Because he was eager to welcome him home. These are obvious. Less obvious is the fact that in heaping embarrassment and maybe even humiliation upon himself through running to meet this prodigal son, the father was taking the brunt of the community's scorn and ridicule. Bailey reports that a man in the modern Near East, an acquaintance of his, was

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12. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 181-82.

not accepted as a pastor by the elders of the city because he walked down the street too fast!

**fell on his neck, and kissed him:** He literally “smothered him with kisses.” The father’s kiss “is a sign of reconciliation and forgiveness. When a serious quarrel has taken place in the village and reconciliation is achieved, a part of the ceremony enacted as a sacrament of reconciliation is a public kiss by the leading men involved.”<sup>13</sup>

*And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: and bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry: for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry.*

**Father, I have sinned:** We note that the boy has altered his prepared speech: he leaves out the part he had planned to say about becoming a hired servant. Why? Does this reveal something about the boy that is sinister and conniving? Has the overly warm welcome caused the boy to rethink things and say to himself, “Hey, wait a minute! Let’s don’t sell ourselves short here”? While this certainly may be the case with some wanderers, our story seems to suggest otherwise: The display of pure love on the part of the father has made the boy’s preplanned speech seem inappropriate and out of place. Whereas the boy’s anticipated apology and proposal seem almost to put him into a bargaining and negotiating posture (in an attitude of “give me some time and I’ll pay you back what I owe you”), the love of the father has melted all that away. When the young man left home as he did, he didn’t necessarily break a law (the inheritance was his, and even if he wasted it, it *was* his), but he damaged a relationship. We do not repair relationships with money.

**But the father said to his servants:** What the father does next is crucial. Why didn’t the father simply hug his son and say, “Well,

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13. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 182.

go on inside, son, and we'll discuss it later"? Because that would have said something about the boy—that he was contemptible, that he was not to be received back as a son. The people in the community probably expected the father, if he accepted the boy back at all, to disinherit him, to consign the prodigal to slave's quarters and slave's food at best. But what the father said to the servants was, essentially, "Accept him as your master."

**the best robe:** This is literally the first robe, the finest robe, the foremost robe, the finest piece of clothing in the house, the one worn by the master or distinguished guests at festive occasions. This is like unto what had been done anciently: Rebekah gave a special robe to Jacob (Genesis 27:15), and Pharaoh gave one to Joseph (Genesis 41:42).

**a ring on his hand:** This was a signet ring. It entitled the bearer to access the estate's most important documents and possessions. "Excavations have shown that the ring is to be regarded as a signet-ring; the gift of a ring signified the bestowal of authority."<sup>14</sup> The ring was "not simply an ornament, but a symbol of authority, especially of royal authority."<sup>15</sup>

**shoes on his feet:** Slaves went barefoot, while freemen wore shoes. The young man returned to prestige. Further, it is worth noting that the servants are asked to place the shoes on the boy, thus suggesting his reinstatement as a member of the family. The shoes "were worn in the house by the master, and not by the guests, who took them off on arrival. Hence they indicated authority and possession as well as freedom."<sup>16</sup>

**bring hither the fatted calf:** The father calls for the "grain-fed" animal. While most of the cattle grazed on grass, the animal designated for festive occasions is stuffed with grain to put on extra weight and make the meat more tender. It is a great honor to have a fatted calf slaughtered in one's behalf. An animal like this might

14. Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (New York: Scribner, 1972), 130.

15. I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 610.

16. Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, 610-11.

feed up to one hundred people, and so it is clear that the banquet for the prodigal will stretch beyond the family to the community. “Meat, which is rarely eaten, marks this as a special occasion.”<sup>17</sup>

It would be perfectly satisfying to most readers to end the parable at this point, for a family seems to have been reunited with their wandering loved one. But the Savior did not choose to finish the story here, for the interpretation of the parable is tied to a different kind of problem. We turn now to the second half of this parable.

*Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard musick and dancing. And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant. And he [the servant] said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound. And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and intreated him.*

**his elder son was in the field:** The oldest son was busy working; clearly, he was a hard worker, a devoted son. He had stayed home, been dutiful, and truly “earned” his portion of the inheritance. We are not told how far from the house the elder son had been working. For all we know, he may not have been near enough to home to be contacted and informed about his brother’s return. It seems strange that the father would not spread the word far and wide as to the prodigal’s return (especially to family members) and of the planned banquet. At any rate, lacking the details (for this is a parable, not really a short story), we find that the elder brother learns of the return and the celebration from a servant. Bailey has stated that “there are good reasons for not notifying him. Doubtless the father knows that the older brother will be upset and, if notified, may even try to prevent the banquet.”<sup>18</sup>

**he was angry:** We must never denigrate in any way the elder son’s steadiness and faithfulness to the rules of the household. It is,

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17. *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 707.

18. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 192.

to be sure, the elder sons of this world that get the work done, that move things forward, that maintain stability in society. But that's not what this parable is about. Like the Pharisees who complain of Jesus's acceptance of the publicans and sinners, the elder brother here complains of the father's acceptance of a sinful son. There is a sense in which the elder son is the good boy with the bad heart; even when the prodigal returns, in a way the elder son is "not yet home" but is still lost.

Why is he angry? One writer has suggested that

he is angry because some basic rules have been broken—not oppressive rules that destroy life, but rules without which no civil life would be possible. The one who works (v. 29) deserves more recognition than the one who squanders; celebrating the squanderer is squandering. The one who obeys where obedience is due (v. 29) deserves more honor than the one who irresponsibly breaks commands; honoring the irresponsible is irresponsible. The one who remains faithful should be treated better than the one who excludes the others; preference for the excluding one is tacit exclusion of the faithful one. When squandering becomes better than working and the breach of relationships better than faithfulness, justice will be perverted and the household will fall apart.<sup>19</sup>

In short, the father's attitudes and actions are foreign to the cultural canons of right/wrong, good/bad, reward/punishment, typical rules by which we operate in a world like ours.

"You know the conversation [the father and older son] then had," noted Elder Jeffrey R. Holland.

Surely, for this father, the pain over a wayward child who had run from home and wallowed with swine is now compounded with the realization that this older, wiser brother,

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19. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 161–62.

the younger boy's childhood hero as older brothers always are, is angry that his brother has come home.

No, I correct myself. This son is not so much angry that the other has come home as he is angry that his parents are so happy about it. Feeling unappreciated and perhaps more than a little self-pity, this dutiful son—and he is *wonderfully* dutiful—forgets for a moment that he has never had to know filth or despair, fear or self-loathing. He forgets for a moment that every calf on the ranch is already his and so are all the robes in the closet and every ring in the drawer. . . .

No, he who has virtually everything, and who has in his hardworking, wonderful way earned it, lacks the one thing that might make him the complete man of the Lord he nearly is. He has yet to come to the compassion and mercy, the charitable breadth of vision to see that *this is not a rival returning*. It is his brother. As his father pled with him to see, it is one who was dead and now is alive. It is one who was lost and now is found.<sup>20</sup>

**and would not go in:** “The shock of this public action is beyond description. The equivalent in Western society might be some case of a wealthy leading figure in a Western community who has a candlelight formal banquet for his most important friends and associates. In the middle of the banquet his unshaven son appears without a shirt or shoes and verbally attacks his father in the presence of the seated guests. Such a scene would be excruciatingly painful for the father. It would show *utter* disregard for the feelings and personal dignity of that father on the part of his son.”<sup>21</sup> Further, “At such a banquet the older son has a special semi-official responsibility. He is expected to move among the guests, offering compliments, making sure everyone has enough to eat, ordering

20. Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Other Prodigal,” *Ensign*, May 2002, 63.

21. Kenneth E. Bailey, *Finding the Lost: Cultural Keys to Luke 15* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1992), 171.

the servants around and, in general, becoming a sort of major-domo of the feast.”<sup>22</sup>

**therefore came his father out:** “The father, risking humiliation and shame, leaves his guests inside the house, goes outdoors, and pleads with the elder son to come in and join the celebration.”<sup>23</sup> We might be prone to say to the father: “Let the older son stew in his juices. He needs to grow up, show some love, and be the man he should be. Let him stay out in the field; he’s missing the fun.” But the father’s tender regard for both of his children is evident; he cannot be completely happy while one of his sons is unhappy, festering in anger, or missing out on the opportunity to rejoice with the rest of the household.

**intreated him:** President Joseph F. Smith commented on this segment of the parable:

Now we may suppose the father reasoned with him somewhat in this wise: “My son, I am surprised at your short sightedness; you should not be jealous of your poor, unfortunate brother, for he is to be pitied; he has squandered his substance, and I thought he was lost forever, that he was as good as dead to me, and hope for his restoration to us had fled. But he has returned in sorrow for his follies, in abject poverty, penitent and humble, freely confessing that he has sinned against heaven and in my sight. . . . I love him as my son, but with my love for him is mingled sorrow, pity, chagrin and commiseration. You have been faithful to me all the while, and in you I have exceeding great joy. I love you with all the affection of my soul, and in you I have perfect confidence, for you have never betrayed it. Beside all this, you have forfeited nothing nor lost anything.”<sup>24</sup>

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22. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 194.

23. Hultgren, *Parables of Jesus*, 80.

24. *Collected Discourses*, comp. Brian H. Stuy (Salt Lake City: B.H.S. Publishing, 1992), 5:52-53.

*And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: but as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf.*

**he answering said to his father:** Note the contempt in the older brother's language: he states, literally, "I'm slaving for you" (v. 29); he does not say in verse 30 "my brother" but rather "this thy son" (meaning "this son of yours"); he adds a detail as to his brother's waywardness by suggesting that the prodigal had "devoured thy living with harlots" (v. 30), when in fact we really do not know from the scriptural text that the younger son had been immoral. Interestingly, these were the same charges made against Jesus—that he ate and drank with sinners (Luke 7:34, 39; 15:1-2). The older brother's emotional distance signals his spiritual distance. In some ways the hardest conversion is for the brother who chose to stay home. Maybe this story should be called the parable of the prodigal sons: while the younger brother had been lost to more visible sins, the older brother is lost in pride, self-righteousness, judgment, and resentment.

**neither transgressed I at any time:** "It has been said and said truly, that the greatest fault is to be conscious of no fault. Self-righteousness shuts a man off both from God and men."<sup>25</sup>

**a kid, that I might make merry with my friends:** Again, we see in verse 29 the older son's scorn in which he bitingly accuses the father of unfairness. The older brother says, essentially: "You've never even given me a goat." Whereas cattle were somewhat scarce, goats were fairly easy to come by. Further, while it would take months to fatten a calf, coming up with a goat to eat would not require anything out of the ordinary. One scholar has estimated that while the ratio of sheep and goats to cattle ranged from 2:1 to 7:1, the value of a cow to a goat was 10:1.<sup>26</sup> It is interesting (and

25. William Barclay, *The Parables of Jesus* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1970), 186.

26. Hultgren, *Parables of Jesus*, 81n48.

perhaps revealing) to note that the oldest son wanted a goat to eat with his *friends*, not with his family.

*And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.*

**Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine:** The word is literally “Child,” indicating the father’s deep tenderness, affection, and appreciation for the nobility of the older son’s deeds. The inheritance, his two-thirds, is still intact and will be his as soon as the father passes away. Nothing has been lost.

**It was meet that we should make merry:** It is not only nice and sweet and kind; the father is here saying that it is *a divine necessity*, the right thing to do on this occasion. It was what he *must* do. It is what God would have done.

## Lessons for Life

There is so much to be learned from the parable of the prodigal son, so many lessons for life. The following represent just a few of those that most impress me.

1. How many of us are startled with our present circumstances by tragedy or trauma—perhaps through the death of a loved one or a crippling injury? How many of us have been awakened by the realization of our plight, coupled with a memory of who we are, who we could be, what we might have achieved?

2. In the words of the immortal Yogi Berra, “It ain’t over till it’s over.” Circumstances change. People change. We just can’t afford to give up on people. It is often the case when we seem to be at our lowest point that we are most ready to be turned around in our walk.

As Elder Dallin H. Oaks explained, while we have been asked by the Lord and his servants to make intermediate judgments every day of our lives—including what is good and what is evil, as well as what we should and should not do—we must not place ourselves in the inappropriate position of judging another in that we assume

that we know his or her final outcome in the Father's plan, particularly whether he or she will be saved or damned hereafter.<sup>27</sup> "There is never a time," the Prophet Joseph Smith declared, "when the spirit is too old to approach God. All are within the reach of pardoning mercy, who have not committed the unpardonable sin."<sup>28</sup>

3. Unlike other parables Jesus told, this is not a story about a bad guy and a good guy. *Only the father is good* (cf. Matthew 19:17). "For the father, the sons cannot be placed on a moral scale and then the returning prodigal, on account of his confession, pronounced better and accepted but the older brother pronounced worse and rejected. The nonprodigal is *good* in that he has remained, worked, obeyed, but he is *bad* in that he was too concerned with the 'rules' and has not received his brother back and rejoiced. The prodigal is *bad* in that he has gone and *good* in that he has returned and confessed. Both are loved, however, irrespective of their goodness or badness."<sup>29</sup> Even though this story has been called the parable of the prodigal son, it might more appropriately be called the parable of the loving father. It is the father, not the younger son, who is the hero of the story.<sup>30</sup>

4. God and the angels in heaven rejoice—and they call upon us to do the same—when lost sheep are retrieved into the fold. This supernal message is echoed in all scripture. As we previously noted, a central message in the allegory of Zenos (Jacob 5) is that Israel's God simply will not let Israel go. And what is true of a nation is equally true of individuals. Few of us in this life will, through our sins, place ourselves beyond the pale of saving grace. Further, while our tears and our hard work allow us to show the depth of our contrition and the seriousness of our commitment, it is not our good work alone that wins the favor of the Father; it is the work of our Divine Redeemer (2 Nephi 2:3, 8; 31:19; Moroni 6:4). Our Advocate with the Father pleads our cause on the basis of *his* suffering and death and mighty merits before God (D&C 45:3-5).

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27. Dallin H. Oaks, "'Judge Not' and Judging," *Ensign*, August 1999, 7-8.

28. *History of the Church*, 4:425.

29. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 165n44, emphasis in original.

30. Barclay, *Parables of Jesus*, 187.

5. Each of us, at one time or another, plays three roles in life: the younger son, the older son, and the father. There are times when each of us strays. Sadly, there are times—far too many in number, I confess—when we are like the older brother. That is, we are dutiful, faithful, dependable, and consistent in our contributions; but we lack that quality of mercy and kindness and compassion that would allow us to reflect and extend the hand of forgiveness and fellowship to those who wander. We must first learn what being a true son or daughter means before we can aspire one day to be like the waiting and welcoming father. Leon Morris has written that “the elder son was conscious of his own rectitude. He was completely self-righteous. He saw himself as the model son, but his use of the verb [meaning] ‘to serve as a slave’ . . . gives him away. He did not really understand what being a son means. That is perhaps why he did not understand what being a father means.”<sup>31</sup>

Henri Nouwen states that “my final vocation is indeed to become like the Father and to live out his divine compassion in my daily life. Though I am both the younger son and the older son, I am not to remain them, but to become the Father. No father or mother ever became father or mother without having been son or daughter, but every son and daughter has to consciously choose to step beyond their childhood and become father and mother for others.” Finally, Nouwen has written that “becoming like the heavenly Father is not just one important aspect of Jesus’ teaching, it is the very heart of his message. . . . Spiritual fatherhood has nothing to do with power or control. It is a fatherhood of compassion. And I have to keep looking at the father embracing the prodigal son to catch a glimpse of this.”<sup>32</sup>

6. It is worth asking: Would I have attended the banquet for the returning prodigal? Would I dare honor someone who had so blatantly dishonored his father? Would I perhaps worry that I would

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31. Leon Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 267.

32. Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 121, 125, 127.

be encouraging waywardness and irresponsibility? Would the party seem to cancel out the seriousness of all the old sins? Stated bluntly, all of us are guilty of sin. All of us are in need of pardoning mercy. All of us fall short of the divine standard.

Inasmuch as each of us is a recipient of unending and unmerited grace, how can we, in the spirit of Christian charity—or in the attitude of sane discourse—speak of the Lord’s pardoning mercy toward prodigal sons and daughters as *unfair*? Of course it’s unfair! It’s all unfair! That a pure and innocent man should suffer and agonize over others’ transgressions is not fair. But the plan of the Father is not a plan of fairness, at least as we judge fairness from our limited perspective; it is a plan of mercy. The Father and the Son love us in ways that we cannot comprehend. They will do all that is within the bounds of propriety to save as many of the posterity of Adam and Eve as will be saved.

### Conclusion

Surely any person who has experienced firsthand the love of God, who has confessed and repented and enjoyed thereafter the marvelous miracle of forgiveness—and this would, of course, include all of us—can identify with the pain and distress and feeling of lostness known to the prodigal. And if we have experienced that change of heart that evidences the impact of the atoning blood of Christ on our lives, then hopefully our desire, like Nephi and Mormon, is that all who have strayed may return and be renewed, no matter the depth of their disgrace. We all know, to be sure, that not everyone will make it. Not all of our Father’s children will inherit eternal life in the celestial kingdom. But that does not preclude any or all of us from hoping and praying and ministering and welcoming those who “come to themselves” and choose to return.

Sadly, as Richard John Neuhaus stated,

The hope that all may be saved . . . offends some Christians. It is as though salvation were a zero-sum proposition,

as though there is only so much to go around, as though God's grace to others will somehow diminish our portion of grace. . . .

If we love others, it seems that we must hope that, in the end, they will be saved. We must hope that all will one day hear the words of Christ, "Today you will be with me in paradise." Given the evidence of Scripture and tradition, we cannot deny that hell exists. We can, however, hope that hell is empty. We cannot know that, but we can hope it is the case.<sup>33</sup>

Our God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving. There is no end to his capacity to reach out, to reclaim, to reinstate.

Unlike a fairy tale, the parable of the prodigal son does not end on the note of "and they lived happily ever after." How does it end? Did the older brother close his ears to the loving counsel of his father, steel himself against compassion, and live and die an angry and bitter man? Or was he, we hope and pray, deeply touched by the love of his father—pure love for him, as well as his returning brother? Did he allow the power of the Almighty to transform his soul, reshape his attitudes and actions, and make him into an instrument of divine love? In fact, this is an open-ended story, and each of us must interpret its meaning in the light of our own experience.

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33. Neuhaus, *Death on a Friday Afternoon*, 57, 61.