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## Prodigal God

Maybe you have heard the phrase said of yourself or another: “The prodigal son/daughter returns.” Usually what is meant by that phrase is that a son or daughter who has been away on a trip has returned. For most of my life, I believed that the word, “prodigal,” means “wandering.” It is only in the last decade or so that I learned that prodigal does not mean “wandering;” it means “wasteful.” A prodigal son or daughter is one who spends money lavishly and without necessity. Someone who goes to the mall and spends \$1000 on clothes that they don’t really need might be considered to be a prodigal person. The prodigal son in Jesus’ parable wasn’t prodigal because he left home. He was prodigal because he wasted his portion of the inheritance. Prodigal is wasteful.

The parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) is the last of three similar parallels. In the first, a shepherd has 100 sheep and one wanders off. He leaves the rest of the sheep (probably not abandoning them but leaving them in the care of another shepherd), and he goes to find that one lost sheep. Upon its recovery, he calls his friends and neighbours to rejoice with him. The second parable shows us a woman who has 10 coins but loses one of them. After searching diligently, she calls her friends and neighbours to rejoice with her. In both of these cases, Jesus gives the lesson: there is great rejoicing in heaven when one sinner repents.

The third parable is the parable of the prodigal son. This son doesn’t just happen to get lost. This son is deliberate in leaving his home, but before he does, he demands that his father give him his share of the inheritance. In those times, each child receives an equal share of the inheritance, with the eldest son receiving a double portion. Thus, this young man would have received one third of his father’s holdings, costing his father dearly and perhaps endangering the family business. Taking this huge sum of money, this young man goes far away and wastes it. He has lots of friends until the money runs out, and then he can barely find a job. Filthy, disheartened, and ashamed, he decides to return to his father’s house and ask to become a slave there. He knows that his father treats slaves better than his present employer, and he hopes that he might be able to live out his life with three meals a day and a place to lay his head.

We know the story well: the father has been waiting at the end of the driveway, looking eagerly down the road to see if his son will return. When he finally sees him, he runs to him, embraces him, and prepares a feast for him, calling his friends and neighbours to join him in his celebrations. We might expect that the parable would end as the others did with Jesus saying that there is great rejoicing in heaven when a sinner repents (as did the first two parables), but that is not where the parable ends. Jesus moves our attention to the older son, the one who will be heir to all that remains to his father, and this older son is angry. He has been entirely faithful for all his life, and his father hasn’t even given him a goat to have a celebration with his friends, whereas the father had provided the wasteful younger brother with a yearling calf. There was no rejoicing on the part of the older brother.

Because Jesus changes up the story, focusing on the older brother instead of the rejoicing in heaven, we are meant to be startled. Is this story really about the return of a wayward son or is it about the reaction

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of the jealous brother? Or is the story really about something else, or, should we say, about someone else? Perhaps this story is about the father, and, by extension, about God.

Timothy Keller, formerly a pastor and now with his Lord, wrote a book entitled, *The Prodigal God*. What kind of God do we have? Keller's choice of the title of his book is a bit tongue in cheek, but he wants to make a point: what kind of God do we have who would "waste" his precious resources on people who have squandered everything he has given to them? Wouldn't common sense say that God would be far better off spending his resources on people who are least trying to do what is right? But, of course, that is not how God works. God tends to put his efforts into welcoming back (and throwing a party for) those who have done the equivalent of demanding their inheritance. That seems so wasteful. Keller goes on to show us how God's grace is immense and unbounded.

When Jesus tells a parable, in a sense we are encouraged to identify with one of the people in that parable. Most of us would be quite hesitant to identify with the younger son because, after all, who wants to admit that they have wasted our heavenly Father's resources after doing the cultural equivalent of slapping him in the face? We don't like to be perceived to be that person. We probably won't identify with the father because the father represents God. We are left with identifying with the older son, at least until his true character is revealed, and then we are trapped because then we have to admit that we might not be as gracious as our heavenly Father. In the end, we have to admit that if we are as graceless as the older brother, we are also in need of grace.

But the story isn't about us. It is about our gracious God who leads the rejoicing in welcoming home repentant sinners. And we are among them, and it doesn't matter if we are like the wasteful son of the seemingly faithful son. We are all in need of God's grace, and when we accept God's grace, there is rejoicing in heaven.

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