

## ***“The Younger Son”*** The Prodigal God, Part 2

Luke 15:11-32  
February 28, 2010

It's not hard for me to imagine how I would respond if my son, Joel, were to come to me one day and ask for his inheritance in advance. With all the calm and self-control that I could muster, I would say to Joel, **ARE YOU NUTS?!** For one, I'm not dead yet. For two, I've got my entire retirement ahead of me and it's going to take every penny to pay for my health insurance premiums. What a blow!

And so it was to the father in our story. Jesus tells of a man with two sons, the younger one of which asked his father, “I want my share of your estate. Now! Before you die!” It was a stunning request because normally the inheritance was not divided up and distributed to the children until the father died. You might think this is just a young man going off into the big city to make his fame and fortune. But actually, in the Middle Eastern world of that time the boy's request had a different meaning all together. It meant, “Dad, why don't you drop dead!” And no doubt, those who heard Jesus tell this story were shocked.

This was a patriarchal society in which you were required to show deference and reverence toward those older or above you. This kind of contempt and insolence would have ordinarily met with outrage. In that culture the father would be expected to take his left hand and hit the kid across his face and drive him out of the house! Fulfilling the request would have been a terrible blow to the economic standing of the family because it meant the father would have to sell off a large portion of his property in order to give the boy his share of the estate. It would be an act of economic violence against the family's integrity.

In those days, most of a family's wealth was in their land. Indeed, their family land was part of their very identity. The Greek word for property that Luke uses is “*bios*” which means “life”. In essence, it says that fulfilling the son's request would mean dividing up his father's life. That's

what it must have felt like. In short, this request ripped the family apart.

Why would the son even make such a request? What was going on in his head heart and soul? I remember well my own desire to make a break with home and strike out on my own. I was eighteen, soon to be nineteen when I announced to my parents my desire to leave our home in Mankato and attend Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington. My mother cried, wishing to keep me close to home. My father winced at the high cost of paying tuition room and board at a private college when I could just as well live at home and attend the public college in Mankato. But I was determined and stubborn in my desire, just as young people often are when they strike out on their own, wanting to sever the apron strings. And yet I was still economically dependent on my parents and my strong wishes were the source of considerable tension.

No doubt the younger son in our story wanted independence, a chance to call the shots without his parents looking over his shoulder. But more than that, his imagination conjured up fascinating thoughts of all the fun he could have with his father's money. His heart was set on the wealth, and on the comfort, freedom and status that wealth brings. His father was just a means to an end. Even knowing that his request would be like a knife in his father's heart, he obviously didn't care. He was more fond of his father's money than of his father.

I don't suppose any of you have ever erected idols of the heart and knelt down in worship at the thought of what money could buy, have you? My parents grew up during the Great Depression and they learned, out of necessity, to make do and live happily without all the extras. When something was broken, they fixed it instead of buying new. I'll not forget the time my father used Super Glue to repair one of his broken teeth. When I begged

my parents to go out to a restaurant for dinner, I remember my mother saying, "We've already been out to eat once this month."

But I was a baby boomer. I grew up in the fifties and sixties and quickly became enamored with all the things money could buy. Even now, at age 61, I'm still in love with things. I have an electronically controlled recliner in which I can relax and be coddled as I watch movies in theater-like stereophonic surround sound complete with four different remote controls. Meals that took my mother hours to prepare can be cooked in minutes in the microwave. I pay my bills online from the comfort of home without ever writing a check or mailing an envelope. I can operate a laptop wirelessly from any room in the house and play a game of Euchre with my son in Minneapolis, my daughter in St. Paul and her boyfriend in Pennsylvania, all at the same time. Type in a few digits and press "go" and I can access research from the limitless stores along the information highway and learn how to fold fitted sheets or the look up the meaning of concupiscence.

What about you? What about your family? Like the younger son, do you ever hanker after the things money could buy if you had the bucks? Video games, a pick-up truck with all the extras, a cabin on the lake, a fishing boat, a season ticket to watch the Packers in Lambeau Field.

It's called American materialism and it seems only to grow and grow until greed becomes the only thing that keeps our economy alive. Unfortunately, kicks have kick backs. Read last week's issue of the Pierce County Herald and see page after page of foreclosures, sheriff sales and delinquent taxpayers.

So, if I were father of that boy in the Bible parable I would have drawn a line in the sand and said, "No! Absolutely not!" Which is why, in my mind, if the boy's request was shocking, the father's response to that request was even more

shocking. The father granted his son's request, divesting of a large portion of his assets and placing in the boy's hands an enormous sum of money with which to spend on his enormous appetite for wine, women and song. With his father's incredible largess he was free to go out and throw it all down the gutter. Which is exactly what he did.

Whatever convinced the dad to hand over the dough? No doubt all the neighbors thought the man had lost his mind. But then, maybe out of a deep and abiding love for his son, he just wanted to keep the door open. If he responded in rage and beaten the young man or done something else severe to him, if he became embittered and carried a grudge against his boy, then the restoration of that relationship might never have happened. The father's heart would have been too hardened to ever receive him back, and the son may never have expected or wanted the father to welcome him home. By bearing the agony and pain of his son's sin, instead of taking revenge, instead of paying the son back by inflicting pain on him, the father kept the door open to the relationship. No doubt he was not the first father who was willing to suffer for the sin of his children.

Indeed, could it be that Jesus told this story exactly for that purpose? Yes, for he, above all, knew the heart of his Father, a heart willing to suffer for the sins of his children, willing to suffer for your sins and mine. What that father in the parable did for his younger son is what God has done for you and me. When God sent Jesus into this world you might have expected him to come in fire and brimstone, come in anger and wrath to drive us out with blows. But God didn't do it that way. Jesus didn't come with a sword in his hands, but with nails in his hands. He didn't come to bring judgement, but to *bear in his own body*, your judgement and mine. Jesus went to the cross and there his life was torn apart. The only property left for someone to inherit was his coat and the soldiers who crucified him rolled

dice to see who would take it home.

A new bass boat can't die for your sins. A castle by the lake cannot die for your sins. The most seductive sex partner cannot die for your sins. But a perfectly happy Father God is capable of leaving all the bliss of heaven and sacrificing life itself for sake of rebellious, undeserving, ungrateful children.

As you all know, Jesus tells us that the prodigal kid ended up in a pig pen, a dreadful address for a Jew who has been taught that pork chops and bacon befoul a man. Having thrown every penny his father gave him down the sewer of human depravity, it says "he came to his senses." You and I were taught that this was his moment of repentance. That's not the case at all. Study the original Greek and you'll discover what it really meant. It meant the boy looked in the mirror and figured a way out of the pig pen. He hatched a plan making it possible to enjoy a warm bed and three square meals a day. He's going to tell his boss to take this pig job and shove it. And since he can't very well go home and expect to be restored to sonship, he'll simply ask his dad to hire him as an employee so he can pay the money back. He's not repenting. He's merely saying, "I can handle this problem. I can fix it. The only issue is the money. He figures, "If I can just get that money paid back I'll be back on easy street."

So, he starts back home, confident that all his problems are going to be solved with a lot of hard work after he gets a job in his dad's business. The truth of the matter is, he hasn't a clue what the real problem really is. But his father knows. His father knows that the problem is not the money but a broken relationship, the agony of rejected love.

That's why the father, with no embarrassment, lifts up the hem of his robe and runs down the road to greet the boy while he's still outside of town. No doubt he's afraid that the townspeople will see the boy coming and beat him up because

he wanted his father to drop dead and now he's lost all the money. So the father runs down the road—something mature men would never do in that culture—and embraces his son and even kisses him. And that is when the young man finally get it straight in his head and heart. The son receives this great outpouring of costly love and he realizes for the first time that he can't make up for what he's done, that the issue is not the money. The issue is the father's broken heart. And there, at the edge of town we find him authentically repenting, accepting the love that is offered to him. All his bright ideas about solving his own problems go up in smoke. How about you? Do you see yourself in this story?

**Let us pray:**

*Lord God, Heavenly Father, with love for your children so incredible that we cannot begin to measure it's height nor depth nor width, it's becomes clear to us this morning that in our hunger and thirst for mere stuff, our greed and insatiable desire for the cheap thrills, we have given in to temptation and run away from you again and again and again. We've traded a loving relationship with you for a pot of porridge and went chasing after other gods like dogs in heat, with the result that we find ourselves in great pain, having made a mess of things. We would seek to find some way to finagle our way back into your graces, but before we could even try, you paid the price of our reconciliation with the flesh and blood of your son, nailed to a cross. And so we come here today, returning to this your table of grace to which you invite and welcome us back home with open arms and the kiss of peace. How can we thank you but offer you the love you have first given us with heart and soul, mind and strength. Grant relief, we pray, through Christ Jesus, to those who are sick and dying. Comfort with the assurance of your Spirit all those who grieve or bear the burden of loss. Guide with the wisdom of your love those who are troubled or in crisis. Brighten the days of those who are depressed with the joy of knowing you. Encourage all who*

*are lonely with the assurance of your constant presence. Send your guardian angels to all who are in any danger. Direct this congregation with the light of your love through the coming days of change and transition. With all the resources you have placed in our hands to accomplish your purposes, keep us ever faithful to the mission with which you have entrusted us together. For this we pray in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen*