

Unseen Lessons from “The Parable of the Prodigal Son”

André Sneidar

Luke 15:11-32

While the story is given the title “The Prodigal Son” in reference to the son who left home with his part of the inheritance to spend it in a prodigal (*i.e.*, extravagant, wasteful) manner, it is a story that involves so much more than just the prodigal son. Of everything I had ever heard or read regarding this parable of Jesus, it occurred to me one day that there are four things in this parable that are *not* mentioned from which we can gain invaluable insight.

No Faithful Son

My first “unseen lesson” is that it’s interesting to note that of the father’s sons, there was no “faithful” son mentioned. There was the son who was the “prodigal” who rebelled and left home to squander his inheritance; then there was the son who rebelled through his bitter, jealous spirit upon the prodigal son’s return and his father’s joyful celebration.

This intrigued me: surely each son considered himself to be faithful at some point – at least prior to the prodigal’s decision to depart. Yet neither son was truly faithful about his state in life (prior to the prodigal’s departure), for their *unfaithfulness* was more obviously manifested after the prodigal’s return.

The supposedly “faithful” son who stayed behind is discovered to be unfaithful, revealing what truly was in his heart: before his brother’s departure with his share of the inheritance, nothing is revealed about his heart; but upon his brother’s return, and as he sees the unfolding events of his father’s rejoicing, then we see what was lurking in his heart all along. It took his brother’s eventual coming to his senses and throwing himself at his father’s feet, to manifest his dissatisfaction and prideful spirit.

I believe there is no faithful son mentioned because, as it relates to us (or, directly, to Israel), there is *no faithful son*. What I mean is this: as we go through life, I think we are either the

“prodigal” son, impetuously leaving our father’s care and foolishly wasting our “inheritance;” or, we are the son who stays home who, while thinking himself to be the “faithful” one, really isn’t faithful because he truly has a bitter, envious and grudging heart.

An Identity Crisis

Why did these sons have these problems? I think there are three issues, all related to an “identity crisis.”

(1) They didn’t know who they were – they were their father’s sons, yet they thought and acted independently from their true identity.

(2) They didn’t know what they were – they thought themselves to be something different than they actually were; they considered themselves faithful sons, and yet manifested their unfaithfulness by their behavior and attitudes.

(3) Most importantly, they didn’t know their father – they didn’t know *who* he was. The returning son thought no more of his father than an angry, overbearing, demanding master, asking only to be treated as a servant, a slave in order to be accepted, rather than a son. The resentful son thought no more of his father than an insensitive, inconsiderate superior, thus never realizing that he possessed his inheritance all along. Neither of the sons acknowledged the inestimable value of their relationship with their father.

In short, the second unseen lesson is that both sons were self-absorbed. Not recognizing the faithfulness of their father, and not being familiar with his love, concern and care for them, their attitudes and actions demonstrated just how self-centered they really were, in spite of their father’s commitment to their welfare.

The Resentful Son

A third thing we don’t “see” is whether the resentful son’s bitter heart was ever resolved with either his father, or his brother. How the father’s heart must have ached as well for this son who revealed his heart’s true essence through his resentful spirit. Yet the father’s love and wisdom is illustrated by the affectionate and tender response to the son who stayed behind, gently urging him to be a part of the family’s celebration, and lovingly assuring him of his standing as his son. I believe their relationships were, at some point beyond the end of the parable, reconciled and healed, for after all, is this not the final outcome of true love?

It is the father’s attitude of grace and charity that fills me with unabated hope. While the second son’s angst over his father’s sudden “memory lapse” regarding his brother’s “failure” is left unsettled, what gives me such hopeful anticipation that it one day will finally be resolved, even though it may take a long time, is what I believe lays buried in the human heart: that there really is such a thing as True Love which reconciles sons to each other, and to their Father.

The Father's Heart

Finally, we do not read any mention of the father's concern for the inheritance that was lost by the departed son. Instead, we perceive the immense relief, joy and gratitude of the father – which is the manifestation of his true heart – for his son's safe, albeit humiliating and ignominious return. His concern was for the welfare of his sons, not the loss of earthly fleeting riches, the possession of which is only temporary, and can bring none of the fulfillment which occurs only with those things which are truly valuable in our lives, those “unseen” riches. Look at I Corinthians 13:4-13, and visualize the father's behavior in his interaction with his sons:

“Charity suffereth long, and is kind ... seeketh not her own ... beareth all things, endureth all things ... Charity never faileth ... the greatest ... is charity.”

If I may be allowed the liberty to paraphrase for today's language:

Love is extremely patient ... and is kind ... is not self-serving or self-seeking, but rather seeks what's best for others ... bears and endures all hardships and inconveniences, even when we may suffer as a result ... Love – true love – *never* fails ... of faith hope and love, love is the greatest.

The word “charity” as used today in our society conveys with it the idea of giving, especially from personal belongings. Thus it implies sacrifice of a greater or lesser degree, because to give of something that is ours is to procure personal loss for the benefit of someone else. Therefore, true love is manifested by allowing the loss of possession to personal detriment for another's need. It is truly an act of selflessness. What a beautiful description of the father's love towards his sons: he allowed one son to leave contrary to his own desire for him, and he suffered his other son's resentment knowing that he could not force him to change his heart. This is a wonderful demonstration of the character of *grace* which was resident in the father's heart.

We don't see the father arguing and striving with his sons about their choices. Rather, if what we read of the father's dialogue with his son who stayed home is of any signification of his manner, I think it safe to presume that he lovingly counseled and guided his sons about what he thought was the best course of action for them, while allowing them to choose their own path. How it must have pierced the father's heart to see one of his sons embark on a venture that not only separated them, but held much risk and peril for the son as well.

Can we imagine how torn was the father's heart as his son left, turning his back on his father as he headed for what he thought would be the grand adventure of his life? How the father's heart must have ached at his son's departure and continued absence, longing to put his arms around him that, in expressing his love for him, would keep him from leaving. How long must he have stood there, watching the profile of his son shrink and eventually disappear into the horizon. It must have felt like a part of him died with his son's exodus. Yet the father would not force his will, his earnest desire for what he knew was best for his son, upon his son. How his heart must have ached with his son's each plodding step forward, every second dragging into a seeming eternity. Still, the father would not force his son to act contrary to his heart. Instead, with what must have been tears in his eyes, he kept his heart and his arms open, waiting for

the day that his son would remember the last loving embrace of his father and know that he could come home.

There was no anger or bitterness on the father's part over the prodigal's behavior, regardless of how foolish he may have thought his son to be. There were no legalistic, judgmental demands from the father that only if and when his son might finally "get his act together," acknowledge his wrongdoing, and then "repent in all humility" that he would then be allowed to return home. NO! Rather, his immense love for his children resulted in the ultimate victory of his love: his son knew and eventually remembered that he had a loving, caring father and home to which he could return.

The attitude of the father's grace was such that he *left the door open*, which eventually would facilitate the son's return. Can we not hear the father saying to his departing son, "My son, I love you, and you will always be welcome, here in our home. There is always a place for you, and I will be here, waiting for you should you desire to return." Thus, even in the midst of the son's failure, humiliation and self-condemnation, he could still think and reason within himself, at the end of himself, "*I can go home – I **will** go home – to my father.*"

Notice that while the son was "*yet a great way off, his father saw him.*" This, to me, is one of the most exciting parts of this story, because it tells me that the father *was looking for his son!* This implies that he had never stopped looking, had been ever straining at the horizon, hoping every day that he might catch the slightest vision of his departed son's return. Then, one day, *Finally! The father glimpses his son just on the horizon!* Can you see the excitement in the father's face, the tears of joy and rejoicing in the father's eyes as he *runs* to greet his son, his arms still open in eager anticipation of the embrace of his son? Can you see them together as they grasp each other and twirl around in a frenzied dance of absolute and utter delight?

Observe also that, while the son began to articulate to his father his well-rehearsed speech – a humiliating confession of his sinful behavior – it was as though his father didn't even hear what he said, as though to say that none of the past behavior of his son had any bearing on the present reality. All that really mattered to the father was *the here and now*.

The Heart of the Matter

Now, is this not *our* story – our parable, if you will – as well? Surely, we all consider ourselves to be "faithful" to some extent or degree. We all judge ourselves as faithful servants of our Father, faithfully doing our part, when really within our hearts we are self-centered and self-absorbed, wanting only what we desire for ourselves, and not considering that our father knows what is best for us. Therefore we either strike out on our own, forsaking our father's wisdom in favor of our own impetuosity and conducting our lives with reckless abandon; or we "faithfully" "stay behind," all the while resenting our brother for doing and "getting away with" what we in our heart might have desired all along but for our sense of "duty," and furthermore resenting him (and possibly even his father) for the lavish celebration for his brother which he probably felt should have been reserved for him for "faithfully" maintaining his station.

In my personal conviction about this wonderful parable, I believe that the reason there is no “faithful son” mentioned is that there is only the two sons, and that eventually they will become the *faithful father!*

In other words, it is not until we have transitioned through the phase of either of the sons (or both), playing our part in life’s parable, that we are able to become, and take on the role of, the faithful father. Furthermore, it is only through the faithful demonstration of the father’s grace, love, longsuffering, compassion and *wisdom* that we learn to be faithful ourselves – *when we eventually fulfill our role as that faithful father.*

The Ultimate Lesson

Now, all of this is not to overshadow the ultimate lesson of this parable: that this parable is really about God – that God is the Faithful Father Who patiently and affectionately waits for His sons to transition through their childish phases of selfishness and pride – waiting for the day when they become faithful sons of their Faithful Father, meanwhile gently and lovingly reminding us of our place in His family as His sons, regardless of where our own path may temporarily lead us.

Is not our Father truly wise? Has He not shared His counsel with us (Scripture), and yet we avoid it? Has He not demonstrated His Love for us (the cross), and yet we reject it? Does not His heart ache for His sons who have wandered aimlessly away from His provision for them, or bitterly resent their brothers, and yet we hear not the silent crying of His broken heart? Yet He patiently and lovingly has kept His heart and His arms open, waiting and anxiously watching for us to come home, home where the doors have been kept open.

Our Heavenly Father has never been an angry, overbearing, demanding, insensitive and inconsiderate Father, insisting that we His children first “get our act together” before beginning our journey home, before He will open the doors and let us come home. No, He has *always* loved us emphatically with an unflinching and unfailing love. Just like the returning son and the resentful son, our Father accepts us in every bit of our failed, fallible, fallen state, having no expectations of us than that we will eventually come to the end of ourselves, and finally recognize and acknowledge Him for Who He is: our Father; our only Loving, Eternal Father, Who has always coveted our best interest, and Who has always pursued our ultimate welfare.

The Parables of Lost Things

Notably, this “Prodigal Son” story is included with two other stories: the lost sheep, and the lost coin; all of which is a response of Jesus to the objections and harassment brought against Him by the religious zealots of His day (the Pharisees and scribes – the resentful son): All three of these are really part of one parable, and are dealing with the Pharisees’ and scribes’ objection to Jesus’ association with those whom these religious zealots considered to be lower-class citizens, at the least unworthy of their consideration, at the worst unworthy of God’s. These people were the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the “lost son” of this parable, and Jesus was showing that they had immense – indeed, immeasurable – value to the Father, and that “even they” are worthy of the Father’s every and constant effort to ensure they will be found, and eventually brought home.

Our life in this world is our passage through the parable of the prodigal son. We have immense – indeed, immeasurable – value to the Father, and “even we” are worthy of the Father’s every and constant effort to ensure we will be found, and eventually brought home. How truly wise is our Father, Who patiently awaits our return home, Who lovingly lets us live our lives as we choose, and devotedly guides our hearts, not forcing us to follow His counsel, but tenderly and passionately persuades us towards forgiveness and reconciliation. His zeal and love for us compels Him to do nothing less.

He has reconciled us to Himself (II Corinthians 5:18); our Father desires that we discover who He is, who we are in Him and who and what He made us to be, and thereby be reconciled to each other. Then all that remains is the celebration upon our homecoming – none of the past will be brought to bear upon the excitement and exhilaration of the fantastic festivity of the Father’s reveling and exultation as he reclaims His children from the far county, rejoicing in the *here and now* of that moment!

“In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy paths” (Proverbs 3:6).

“While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal” (II Corinthians 4:18).

Taken from the *Bible Student’s Notebook*[™], a weekly Bible study publication available in two formats (electronic and printed)

www.BibleStudentsNotebook.com

Study Shelf, PO Box 265, Windber, PA 15963
1-800-784-6010 / www.StudyShelf.com

B I B L E S T U D E N T ’ S P R E S S [™]
W i n d b e r , P e n n s y l v a n i a

