

The Prodigal's Father

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Preacher: Derek Lamont

[0 : 00] We turn back with me just for a few minutes this morning to Luke's Gospel chapter 15 and it's the well-known passage that we read together, the parable of the prodigal or the lost son.

And what I want to do this morning just for a little while, and I think it's quite appropriate given some of the things we've been saying and praying for this morning, is look at this parable, not in depth and not looking at every aspect of it, but I would like to look at it for a few minutes in the light of the Father.

I'd like to look at it from the Father's point of view just for a few minutes this morning. I think very often when difficulties arise, when we struggle with things, when unwanted illness or other things come into our lives, we ask the question, why, don't we? We always ask that question.

And sometimes, maybe even subconsciously in our thinking, it's the Father who gets a raw deal. It's God the Father we think is unfair or unwise.

We somehow deflect the attention from the Son, where the Son's committed to us, Jesus. We see that. We can understand Jesus a little bit better, can't we? Because we can see Him as it were, because He came among us, and we can see His love.

[1 : 24] We can see the commitment. And sometimes the Father has been given a hard time for sending the Son. I mean, I think we can't go into that today, and the complexity of the Trinity and the willingness of the Son to go on, and the recognition that the Father was absolutely involved in the cross, and in the pain and the suffering of that.

But I would just like to look at this parable from the point of view of the Father for a few minutes. We know He's just. We know He's a God of judgment because He's our maker, and we will stand before Him.

And we know He's pure, and He's perfect, and He's holy. And sometimes we feel distanced from Him because of that. And we close our minds a little bit to these thoughts and these concepts, because it's so big and He's so glorious and so great.

But here Jesus gives this picture to us in the context of salvation, in the context of Him coming to die for sinners.

That He came for the publicans, the tax collectors and the sinners. That He was sitting among, that He was socialising with, that the Pharisees, the religious leaders, looked down their noses at.

[2 : 47] He wasn't like that. He was in among them because He saw their need. And He tells the parable of lost sheep and lost coin and of lost son. And there's this aspect to it which is so interesting, which is the Father's angle.

Now it's just a story. It's a lot better than the one I was telling. But it's just a story, but it's from Jesus. So it's a perfect story. And it's a story, a parable, that has relevance and meanings, because it's telling us things that we need to know.

It's not a complete story. It's not the whole gospel. It doesn't deal really with redemption or with atonement. It's all within the story, as it were.

It's all implicit within what Jesus has come to do. But it does tell us about the Father. And it helps us to see it with a picture, a little bit about the Father, that we can glean as well from other parts of the scripture as well.

I just want to notice some things quickly. The Father's pain, you know. We forget that in this story. But as parents, as fathers particularly, maybe, we sense that.

[3 : 55] Yet all of us can sense it when, even in our imagination, we can sense it. When his younger son decides one day to take his share of the estate.

You know, and I know you've heard it before. I've probably said it from here before, where basically his son was saying, look, Dad, I would rather you were dead. Because then I would get you inheritance. That's effectively what he was saying.

Just give me it now. Okay, I'll just leave. I'll take your inheritance. And it will be as if you're dead anyway. Because I'm going. I want my share of the estate.

And so the Father divides the property between them. Probably, given the older son his as well.

Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had and sets out for a distant country in squanders as well. What a difficult period that must have been, eh?

[4 : 57] His son had made that demand. He'd said what he was going to say. He'd taken the money. And there's that awkward period where he's still at home. Not long. He doesn't stay long.

But how difficult must that have been? How much pain must the Father have gone through, giving what his son wanted, but knowing that it was going to be squandered.

And not being able to change his mind. The investment of time and of love. And the hopes and aspirations he had for him. All intensified as he walks out the door.

Knowing the folly that he was walking into. And yet respecting his freedom to do so. The Father's pain.

Now there's great complexity within that. Great complexity within the Father's will and his sovereign power and our freedoms. But surely that is true. Is it not in the mystery of providence that God is pained in our rejection of him.

[6 : 02] Knowing where it leads us and where we go with it. And yet allows us the freedom because we are made in his image and not made as robots and not made without will.

Allows us to take these roads we take. Even Jesus himself is at the end of his damning passage of judgment on the Pharisees.

And there's of course there's a tremendously interesting link between the Pharisees and the elder brother in this passage. I probably won't have any time to look at today. But Jesus said, how Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often I long to gather you.

Your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under their wings. But you were not willing. The Father's pain as he pours out love and goodness and gifts to us.

The pain intensified by us letting go of him. A little bit like the children in the story, the child in the story, John in the story. Knowing the consequences of our rebellion is a dead end road.

[7 : 12] Ninety miles an hour down a dead end street. But letting us take that choice. And so often in our lives we choose to go against God and we choose to go our own way and we forget the Father's pain as it's expressed here and elsewhere in Scripture.

We also recognise the Father's, I'm slightly further on, the Father's longing Luke. Well, the son was still a long way off.

His father saw him and was filled with compassion. And it's that whole picture, isn't it? Of not a father going about his business, going about his work on the farm and forgetting what had happened with his son.

But it's this amazing kind of picture of a father who is waiting and longing. And each day he wakes up and omens his currents. Okay, that's a very western way of looking at the story.

But he omens his currents and looks out and says, he's the son there. Is he on his way back? Is he going to come today? Will he be there? And there's this desire for him longing for him to return.

[8 : 20] Now, I know it becomes difficult talking about God in human terms because it seems to imply a weakness or a lack of knowledge or a lack of sovereignty, a lack of power.

But we do know from 2 Peter 3, 9, that God is patient with us, not wanting anyone to perish. But everyone to come to repentance. There's this sense in which as this world goes its own way and we question and we doubt and we're struggling with why atrocities are happening and why things are going on and why God allows it.

Why doesn't God stop us? Why doesn't God bring that he's waiting? That he's patient. That he's wanting people to come. That he's longing for those to come back to him. And he has that desire within us and that longing.

There's someone on the loose. I think their father should long for them to get them back.

But of course you also have the father's reaction in the end of verse 20. You know, we were still a long way off. His father saw him and was filled with compassion for him.

[9 : 33] He ran to his son through his arms around him and kissed him. There's this great compassion. You know, it's a great characteristic of God. We tend to lack compassion.

It's one of the greatest gifts of humanity that sin... The first thing sin destroys is compassion. Because compassion is care for others.

Love and concern for the welfare of others. It's a beautiful gift. And sin blocks it and makes us... What? What is sin? It makes us selfish. Self-centred.

Self-interested. Not concerned and compassionate about others. Such a beautiful word. And the father is filled here in the story with tender pity and compassion.

And that's how he feels towards those who are lost. Towards us, before we came to Christ and in Christ. He shows and gives compassion.

[10 : 37] Tender pity towards us. You know, it's Jesus. That great picture of Jesus as well. And I know I'm mixing between the father and the son. But it's, you know, Jesus, the son is the father revealed.

And we see he saw the crowds in Matthew 9.36. He had compassion on them. Tender pity on them. Because they were harassed and helpless like a shepherd. Like sheep without a shepherd.

That's the compassion and the gentleness and the love of the father they has for us. Saint Corinthians 1 talks about it in that great passage that I'll often read at funerals.

He's the father of all compassion. The God of all comfort. Who comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort those in any trouble. With the comfort we are... With the compassion, the comfort that we ourselves have received from God.

And that's the reality of the father's love for us. When he sees us coming back to him. When he just sees us returning. That's all he asks. We just turn round and face him and go towards him in our lives.

[11 : 37] That's the hardest thing, is it not? Is that not the hardest thing to do? We would, if we asked us to walk up Everest, we would do it, wouldn't we? If we think we could help and get closer to him that way.

Or if he asked us to memorise the whole book of Romans, we would do it. Because we would feel achievement in something we were doing something valuable. But he says, no, just turn to me and say sorry.

Turn to me and admit your need. And he overflows with compassion with us. And in loss and in darkness.

So many difficult things to understand, you know. But he has compassion. He has tender pity.

And we also see in the fourth place is active welcome. You know, he had compassion for the son. Well, he was still a long way off. His father saw him and was filled with compassion.

[12 : 33] And went to what ran to his son. Now it's interesting, he ran to his son. He also went out to speak to the elder brother.

In both situations, in both conditions, God took the initiative. God went out, or the father went out. The father went out to the long lost son.

The father also went out to the grumpy older brother. Went out to speak to him. The grumpy, selfish, uncompassionate older brother.

Now, you know, it is maybe reading too much into this. But surely the greatest expression implicit within this is the father's reaching out through the incarnation of the son towards his, he takes the first step.

In the courtroom of heaven, he's the one who discusses between the father, son and Holy Spirit. What needs to be done to redeem humanity and to bring humanity back. And Jesus says, I will go.

[13 : 45] And the father sends his son with all the pain and the suffering going from a place of great warmth and security and perfection and joy and glory and majesty and acceptance and going out into a desert.

In a place where he wasn't even asked, wasn't even wanted. And emptying himself of all that and ending up on the cross. With all the mystery of the forsakenness that he experienced in the cross.

But that active, it's maybe implied loosely here that he goes out and it's through the redemption of Jesus Christ that the father can welcome sinners in.

And that is what his work is. That is what his job is. Through Jesus Christ to welcome sinners.

And then there's also his passionate embrace, isn't there? Passionate embrace. This passage he ran to send through his arms around him and kissed him. And embrace.

[14 : 56] So significant in the story is God is revealing. Jesus is revealing the nature of God towards the tax collectors and the sinners, the lost.

The people that were rejected. The people that the religious had no time for. And it's God, we're told, gives us passionate embrace. Says it all with that silent.

He said, there's no words at this point. There's this passionate embrace which says, I love you. You're already forgiven. And that great reality is ours in Christ.

Is that we are spiritually embraced by the father through the work of the Son where he says, I love you. It's the kind of picture of underneath our lives being the everlasting arms.

And the knowledge of that and the reality of that. Embrace that relationship, that closeness, that engulfing. Or do you sense that?

[16 : 01] Are you aware of that in your Christian life? The sense of God being around you, God embracing you. God redeeming you, God accepting you.

Are you aware? Is that a reality for you? Is that a theological truism maybe, but not anything that marks warmth or spiritual reality or a sense of having been shown compassion and having received compassion from the Father.

I think probably even more so in our darkness, in difficult times, that that is a reality of the Father that we want to pray for and pray for in others.

We're not going to know why things happen. We're not asked to give an A to Z of the sovereign will of God in our lives that takes us through the darkness that we go through.

But there will be times when you'll be asked to embrace someone. Because that will speak of the love of God far more than any fancy theological solutions to their needs.

[17 : 09] Just embrace them because you've been embraced with the love of God. And embrace them and pray that they might sense that embrace that is completely inexplicable. And a piece that passes understanding that can't just be mathematically, kind of formulaically made up with a kind of spiritual maths.

It is the reality of a piece that passes understanding that comes from knowing God's presence in our lives, saying, I know, you know, I know.

Or something within that embrace that says, I know. And why can God, why can the Father say that? Why can He say, I know in the darkness? Because it comes in the understanding of what He has gone through Himself on the cross and in the blood-soaked sweat of the garden and in the cry of dereliction on the cross and the momentary eternal separation from the Father that we can't understand, but God understands.

God was absolutely in the cross. God was absolutely part of what went on, not in a distant and in a careless way, but He is the God who is the Father of all compassion and understands.

So we don't understand. Do we? We don't understand. We're not asked to understand. We're not asked to understand what others are going through and we're certainly not asked to explain what they're going through with pious truisms, but we are asked to pray for them and to embrace them and to love them.

[19 : 02] And you know, as own tender affection we see not only in the kiss, but not only in the hug and embrace, but also in the kiss that He gives them, the kiss of acceptance.

You know, almost a healing kiss. You know, as a parent or as a child, you've had that healing kiss from your parents. It's a parent when you've given that healing kiss to your children.

You know, it's magical, isn't it? A magic kiss. Heals everything. And you know how good and how significant it is, healing broken bodies, hearts and relationships.

That's the kiss of acceptance from the Father. And that's all he asks for is that we return and receive his acceptance and his healing.

You know, when a child will say sorry to his parent ordinarily, there's just no question of forgiveness, is there? Obviously sometimes in a sinful world in which we live, that must be the case, but we can't imagine it in most cases.

[20 : 18] And God says, look, that's what I'm asking. You recognize your need and your lostness and the poverty of your choices and the darkness of our decisions and the stupidity of the path we take without him and say sorry.

There's the path of life. Please take me back. And that, you know, I don't think that changes for us. This is not just an evangelistic service to those who have stayed away from Jesus all their lives and never come to faith.

Surely for us as Christians, we need to recognize the prodigality of the love of the Father on a daily basis. If you're not going back to God and saying sorry, you're not going back to him recognizing his compassion and your need of his compassion, then you and I are poverty-stricken spiritually.

We may have all the theological knowledge, but we are poverty-stricken and empty because we are missing out on that inexplicable peace and relationship and love with the Father.

And then lastly and very briefly, just recognize the Father's words as well, not just his actions which speak so much more, don't they? In many ways, then the words that we sometimes want to use, our actions are important, but also the Father does speak, you know, and he says, let's celebrate.

[21 : 50] And he knows the depth of the need that has been revealed. He doesn't say, you know, the Son was away, far away for a long time, and now he's back, he says he was dead and now he's alive.

And you know, that is the gospel through and through. Unless we recognize that we were dead spiritually, separated from God, we will never come back to him. And I do think it's one of the curses of the society in which we live, we can have our bacon and eggs, we can put on our nice Christmas jumpers and all our new clothes, and then we can have dinner, and then we can go to the fridge because it's stocked full, and we can go to the bank and relatively speaking, you know, we will have lots of money in there to get the essentials we need, and we'll put on our essential heating, and we live from day to day with all that we need for daily living.

And it's hard to sense our need of Christ, our spiritual need. And so there's this need, this spiritual need, for God to open our eyes and to recognize that we are dead without him, spiritually, and eternally lost.

And we need him to bring us to life. He can only do that, and he's the one who gives us that great hope and that great reality. And there's celebration in that.

Great celebration in coming to spiritual life. That's why the greatest thing in a church is to see conversions, to see people coming to faith, because that is a means of celebration.

[23 : 24] We should celebrate when people come to faith, and there should be a sense of a bit of disappointment when people aren't coming to faith, because there's not so much to celebrate. We should be pleading for that, praying for that, asking for that.

We've all got our contacts. 300 people at the carol service. Great of them there, but no good in and of itself, unless they hear the message and respond to the message and come to faith, and then we can really celebrate and have a good time.

Sometimes we're in church and say, yeah, you would think it was just the worst thing ever. We're only here like bad medicine. But it's a celebration. It's a celebration of what God's doing. And even as believers, every day, it's a celebration.

Every time we open the word, it's a celebration because we have life and joy and peace. And you know, pray Sam 51 if you've lost it. Pray it. Lord, restore to me the joy of my salvation.

Because you know, we look like misery guts half the time in our Christian lives. We all get away, the world in our shoulders. It's awful. It's oppressive. It's terrible. We're in a battle. Of course we're in a battle.

[24 : 24] Let's man up and woman up and recognize that and rejoice that we have life. And rejoice always done that we were dead and we're alive again. Let's celebrate and celebrate what it is to be a Christian.

So difficult sometimes for us because we're so obsessed with our own tiny little lives that are passing quicker than a weaver's shawl.

We don't like the whole concept of living compassionately. Not only for ourselves, but well, we like it maybe. If God does it for ourselves, but maybe not for others. So let us rejoice and let us learn from the even the amazing patience of the Father for the grumpy, ungrateful older son.

And he's referring to the Pharisees here, isn't he? Clearly. And yet throughout here, even in all his condemnation of the Pharisees in the Gospels, he longs for them.

He longs for them to return. He longs for them because they've had all the privileges and he loves them. He longs for them. May that be our attitude too, both for the religious Pharisees and the recognition that there's a Pharisee in all of us at many times and that we seek his forgiveness and his grace and his compassion and his love and his acceptance. Let's bow our heads and pray.

[25 : 47] Lord God, help us. We pray to honour you. Help us to learn from you. Help us to be humble under your leadership and your grace and your care. And may we do all things in the name of Jesus.

Recognising the great mystery of the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Cooperating intimately and eternally and magnificently to redeem us and to buy us back and to pay the price and to pour out grace free and full grace into our lives.

May we not come thinking we have anything to offer you except our own repentance and sorrow. And may we do so willingly and lovingly knowing that we've accepted in Christ.

So here are prayers and here are a worship for we offer it in Jesus' name because we have no other name in whose name we can come. And bless us as we sing together our parting song for Jesus' sake. Amen.