

AUTHENTIC MERCY
Luke 15:11-32

INTRODUCTION:

There have been a few famous families where we knew the father and the kids but we didn't know the mother:

- Andy and Opie Taylor of Mayberry, NC
- Ben and the Cartwright boys of the Ponderosa Ranch
- Steve Douglas of *My Three Sons* and his three sons: Mike, Robbie, Chip and Ernie
- And the family in Luke 15:11-32 – where there is also a father and his sons. Will you listen as I read the story?

¹¹ *Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.*

¹³ *"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.*

¹⁷ *"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.'²⁰ So he got up and went to his father.*

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

²¹ *"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'*

²² *"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.*

²⁵ *“Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷ ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’*

²⁸ *“The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’*

³¹ *“‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”*

This parable has been called “The Parable of the Lost Son”. Helmut Thielicke called it “The Day God Ran.” But we most often hear it called “The Parable of the Prodigal Son”. In fact, it has been called that so often that we may have forgotten what the word “prodigal” really means. Many think “prodigal” means runaway or rebellious. When I was in my Junior High School years, my father taught night classes at a medium security penitentiary in Moberly, MO and they had a gospel choir with the name: The Prodigals. But “prodigal” does not mean disobedient, defiant or wayward. The first dictionary definition of prodigal is:

Given to extravagant expenditures; expending money or other things without necessity; exceedingly or recklessly wasteful; not frugal or economical.

And the second dictionary definition is: *profuse, extremely abundant then, extremely generous, lavish.*

You see, what made this son prodigal was not that he was wandering; it was that he was wasteful.

I want to suggest that the young son was not the only prodigal in the family. If he was lavish in his spending, I believe his father was lavish, too. Let’s look at some ways in which this unnamed dad was a prodigal father.

I. HE WAS LAVISH IN HIS RELEASE (He let his son go)

The son said to his Dad, “*Father, give me my share of the estate.*” Now, that is a strange request, is it not? To ask for the will to be settled before the death had occurred.

But if that is a strange request, the response of the father was even more strange: **he did it!**

*“So he divided his property between **them**.”* That is, they both got their shares. Typically, under Jewish law, the older son would have received two shares and all other children would receive one share. If there were four children, the estate would be divided five ways and each son would get one-fifth except the oldest son, who would receive two-fifths. But in this story, there were only two heirs so one would receive one-third and the other would receive two-thirds.

In Jesus’ parable, the father gave his younger son one-third of his estate. What was he thinking? Didn’t he know what the boy was apt to do? I believe he probably knew exactly what the boy was going to do with the money. But love that is forced is not love at all; it is only manipulation. And if the young man were forced to stay at home only because he couldn’t afford to leave, his father didn’t have much reason to keep him there.

So he was released to leave; to try; to fail; to fall.

II. **HE WAS LAVISH IN HIS RESTRAINT (He let him stay)**

“Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.”

Look at all this young man lost: he lost his fortune; he lost his friends; but most of all, he lost time. Time is a treasure which, when lost, can never be regained. Fortunes can be made, lost and made again. Friendships can be formed, broken and renewed. But a day, an hour, a minute or a moment lost is irretrievably gone. We do not know how long this son was gone from home but all the time spent in the far country was time that was gone forever.

Encouraging kids to sow their wild oats is not a healthy thing. But neither is a life of repression. This father showed restraint in that he let his son bottom-out. One of the hardest things we ever do as parents is to let our kids fail. But sometimes, that is exactly what we have to do if we are to really help them learn to succeed. This father undoubtedly could have prevented his son from spending and wasting all of his inheritance. But he would have prevented an invaluable lesson the boy would learn no other way.

God is not an enabler who always bails us out of the messes we make for ourselves. And He knows there are some lessons that some of us will only learn through the pain of failure, grief and loss.

III. HE WAS LAVISH IN HIS RECEPTION (He let him return)

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.”

Notice what the father did not do. He gave his son no lecture on economics. He took his son on no guilt trip about the grief and pain he had cost the family. He delivered no “I told you so” speeches.

He saw him. He loved him. He ran to him. He held him. He kissed him. He let his son return and received him lavishly; prodigally.

IV. HE WAS LAVISH IN HIS RESTORATION (He let him belong)

“But the father said to his servants, “Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.”

The robe would have been a robe of honor like Jacob gave his son Joseph in the Old Testament. Joseph’s coat may have been one of many colors or one with long sleeves (the Hebrew text could mean either) but regardless, it certainly conveyed a position of honor in the family: a fact that was not lost on Joseph’s brothers.

The ring would have been a symbol of authority. This was the father’s signet ring; his seal. It was like having the rubber stamp of his dad’s signature. This meant the younger son had the authority to do business in his father’s name.

The sandals were a sign of freedom. Sons wore shoes, servants did not. The younger son, while he was in the far country, when he came to himself, decided he would return to his father and offer to work for him as one of his hired servants. But the father did not receive him as a servant but as a son.

You see, he was not just received and forgiven, he was restored to his former position in the family with all the same rights and all the same responsibilities.

We call ourselves a Restoration Movement because of our effort to restore the church to the way it was in the First Century. But we are not always a Restoration Movement in the sense of restoring brothers and sisters who have fallen and failed. We need to work on that.

V. HE WAS LAVISH IN HIS REJOICING (He let him celebrate)

“Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found. So they began to celebrate.”

In this chapter where we are told about lost things, all of the parables end with a party. And the parables are all told for the same reason: the Pharisees were criticizing Jesus for eating with sinners. (Didn’t they know that if he didn’t eat with sinners, he would eat alone?) Jesus was illustrating how the righteous should react when a lost one is found. The righteous should celebrate.

CONCLUSION:

Honesty had to precede the celebration, however. The neighbors could not come in and celebrate the son’s return if they had not known of his absence. The father in this parable made himself vulnerable to criticism, to gossip and to condemnation when he told the neighbors that his son was gone. Some might have called him a fool for agreeing to give the boy his share of the inheritance. Down at the town square, the tongues might have wagged like a dog’s tail over this dad’s tale of a restless and a reckless son. Some might have suggested that he was better off without the boy around. But the father must have taken the risk of telling his friends that his son had left home and had taken a piece of his heart with him. His honesty made him vulnerable. But honesty breeds fellowship while hypocrisy breeds isolation.

Some say the church is full of hypocrites. I disagree. I know of very few hypocrites in the church. I believe the church is full of failures: people who have failed to live up to God’s expectations and their own. They are not failures who are trying to pretend to be godly, they are failures who are trying to be godly.

I have great good news! Our Father loves failures. He watches for them. He is filled with compassion for them and He runs to them.

WHEN GOD RAN

By Benny Hester and John Parenti

Almighty God, the great I am
 Immovable rock, omnipotent, powerful, awesome Lord
 Victorious warrior, commanding King of Kings
 Mighty conqueror, and the only time
 the only time I ever saw Him run

CHORUS:

Was when He ran to me, He took me in His arms
 Held my head to His chest, said “My son’s come home

again”

Lifted my face, wiped the tears from my eyes
With forgiveness in His voice He said,
“Son do you know I still love you?”
He caught me by surprise when God ran

The day I left home I knew I’d broken His heart
And I wondered then if things could ever be the same
Then one night I remembered His love for me
And down that dusty road ahead I could see
It was the only time – it was the only time I ever saw Him run

And then He ran to me, He took me in His arms
Held my head to His chest, said “My son’s come home
again”
Lifted my face, wiped the tears from my eyes
With forgiveness in His voice He said,
“Son do you know I still love you?”
He caught me by surprise as He brought me to my knees
When God ran – I saw Him run to me

BRIDGE:

I was so ashamed, all alone and so far away
But now I know He’s been waiting for this day

I saw Him run to me, He took me in His arms
Held my head to His chest, said “My son’s come home
again”
Lifted my face, wiped the tears from my eyes
With forgiveness in His voice I felt His love for me again

He ran to me, He took me in His arms
Held my head to His chest, said “My son’s come home
again”
Lifted my face, wiped the tears from my eyes
With forgiveness in His voice He said, “Son”, He called me
Son
He said, “Son do you know I still love you?”
He ran to me and then I ran to Him
When God ran

As I said, I have great good news! Our Father loves failures. He watches for them. He is filled with compassion for them. He runs to them. He embraces them. He receives them. He restores them. And He invites us to rejoice with Him at their return.