

THE PRODIGAL SON AND HIS LOVING AND WISE FATHER
(A Different Take)

The parable of the Prodigal Son is perhaps the best known of all Jesus' parables. But today I'd like to take a different approach from the standard interpretation we hear so often, of the son's self-centered, immoral extravagance and eventual conversion. To me, it is more properly a story about the father's wisdom and unconditional love for his son. Surely a reflection of our Heavenly Father.

The story begins with the younger son, described as being spoiled rotten, self-absorbed, and self-willed, who becomes enamored by the excitement of lust and the pursuit of worldly pleasures. He insists that his father immediately give him his expected inheritance amounting to 1/2 of all his father's estate. One-half of that which the father painstakingly labored for years to build. Interestingly enough, and of crucial importance is the fact that the father knew full well that his son had no legal right, whatsoever to half of his estate! You see, according to Jewish law, in that patriarchal society, upon the death of the patriarch, the entire estate would revert exclusively to the first born son, in this case the older brother, who might or might not divide lesser portions to his younger siblings. And I'm sure the younger son also knew this. But, notice the boy's language: "Father, give me the share of your estate, that SHOULD come to me!" You see the father knows that he was already lost, even before he left!

With this in mind, why would the father give into the boy's arrogant and selfish demands? You see, this wise and loving father intuitively knew the probable outcome, given the boy's current spoiled and selfish condition. He instinctively knew his son would likely indulge himself in a life of dissipation and worldly pleasures and extravagantly squander all the money. So if he truly loved his son, why would he do it, knowing all the certain dangers and crises his son would likely face?

But, this wise and loving father also knew that after the boy wasted his inheritance away, he would go only in one of two likely directions: Either in the direction of self-pity and immobilizing despair, ending up being forever lost. Or alternatively, there was just an outside chance, that when he hit bottom as a result of the pain and suffering that would likely follow his actions, he just might make a realistic and honest self-appraisal of his actions, and learn from his mistakes, leading to sincere repentance and conversion of heart.

If on the other hand, the father were to choose to deny his son's claim to half of his estate, using the law as an excuse, then he would certainly be saving and shielding him from encountering all of these likely afflictions and sorrows. But at the same time, wouldn't he also be depriving his son from an opportunity to learn many valuable lessons in life? Aren't the most valuable lessons in life learned as the result of experiencing the pain and suffering that usually follows one's mistakes, failures and misadventures?

To this extent, it can be said that there is indeed, profit in pain! So in the father's wise estimation, giving the boy his alleged inheritance would be worth the risk, for it just might ultimately save his life! He would even permit sin, if it might just lead the boy to salvation!

We also see the father's love vividly demonstrated in this parable, describing his son's journey home: "While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion." It was no coincidence that the father just happened to be gazing at the horizon at the very moment the boy appeared. For he must have been scanning the horizon every day anxiously watching and waiting for his son to return. In addition, instead of waiting for the boy to come to him, the father ran to his son, embraced and kissed him for the boy's tattered and torn appearance evidenced his deep contrition and true conversion! Even before the son could finish his confession, the father interrupted him by ordering his servants to put a fine robe about him, reflecting his son's dignity, a ring on his finger, reflecting his nobility, and

ordered killing the fattened calf, reflecting his son's return and his father's joy! "For he who was dead, has come back to life again. He, who was lost, has been found!"

Truly, the father in this parable is a reflection of our wise and loving Father in Heaven. And I'm sure many of us in the past might have also experienced incidents, consistent with those of the prodigal son. And our Loving Father's gifts of freedom can truly be said to be akin to the boy's inheritance.

Now as we reflect back in our lives, how many times have we selfishly squandered these valuable gifts of freedom by indulging in extravagant and self-centered pursuits, often resulting in pain and suffering. For events in life can suddenly turn on us like a gathering storm! Then comes the moment of our awakening that literally shakes us to the core. Somehow we come to our senses! Now we begin to see ourselves in terms of who we really are; the reality of our weakened and sinful human condition.

For the dark nights we are all made to experience are not calculated by God to punish us, but to empower us. For when rendered low by our mistakes or life's circumstances, there are no more deceptive illusions left. By suffering much, we have also gained much, for there is never gain without pain! Only when we are overwhelmed by our own vulnerability are we capable of acknowledging the full depth and breath of our utter dependence on our loving Father! So like the father in this parable, our Loving Father in Heaven often permits us to experience pain and suffering, that usually follows our mistakes and misadventures because of the beneficial effects they have, cleansing and purging us from sin, and hoping that we too, might honestly and prudently re-assess our situation, change our attitudes, and come to our senses! Then it can be truly said that there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than in ninety-nine who have no need of repentance!

God bless you all