

## **Seeing Things the Way They Really Are**

Why does the prodigal son return home to the father? I guess the quick answer could be because he had hit rock-bottom. All the suffering he was experiencing (*and rightly so, we might add*) caused him to tuck tail and return home in humility and shame. Okay...but **why** does he return home? The quick answers are correct. Don't get me wrong. But...there's more to it, and Jesus makes this clear. Verse 17 states that the prodigal son "came to himself" and then devised the plan to return home and ask for the father's mercy.

He "came to himself." *What does this mean?* In a nutshell, this means that the prodigal son was now finally able to see things for how they *really* were. All the veneer had been stripped away. The blinders were off. There was no sugar-coating it. He wasn't a poor innocent victim of circumstance. He wasn't simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. He hadn't been cheated or wronged by anyone. *He came to himself.* His eyes were finally opened to see reality. He was now finally able to see the truth; to recognize the schlepp in the mirror for who and what he really was: a degenerate sinner who deserved nothing from the father; nothing but the miserable suffering and death he had earned himself.

It is at this pivotal point of contrition and sorrow that he turns and returns home to beg his father's mercy. Maybe that's not the best way I should word this. Yes, he turns and returns toward home after finally seeing his wretched sinful self and sinful reality for what they really are. *But...does he return with the humble intentions of begging his father's mercy?* No. In fact, his whole return is founded on the premise of working a deal with dear old dad. He doesn't expect to be restored to the family. He knows he doesn't deserve that, and he's absolutely correct in his assessment. But...he is willing to "man up" and work off his debt and his shame. He wants to strike a deal with dad. "Make me a servant." He wants to work off and restore the inheritance he squandered. He wants to earn the father's mercy (which, by very definition of the word, makes it not mercy, but nothing more than a transaction; something due for services rendered).

Not surprisingly, this was also the belief of the Scribes and the Pharisees when it came to "repentance" and mercy. (It's important to remember that Jesus taught this parable to them). You see, Jesus was teaching and eating with the tax collectors and prostitutes. These prodigal children—these wretched sinners—had done **nothing** in terms of "*earning*" mercy, and *Jesus wasn't demanding anything of them either*. In the eyes of the Scribes and Pharisees, these lowlives weren't repentant at all. After all, they hadn't done anything to **merit** mercy. No good works. No good deeds. No fasts. No pilgrimages. No extra offerings or sacrifices. Not even any volunteer work. These repugnant lowlives were simply

asking for mercy, and Jesus was simply forgiving these reprobates! More than that, He was welcoming them! How dare He?!

The prodigal son's notion of mercy and repentance was no different than the Scribes' and Pharisees'...*at first*. Had the parable ended at this point, with the prodigal son returning home to earn back the father's mercy, the Scribes and Pharisees would've rejoiced over such moralistic works-righteousness. But...that's not where the parable ends. When the prodigal son actually came face-to-face with his dad, he had a bit of an epiphany. Standing in the presence of his father, he was able to see things for how they truly are. He finally understood what true repentance and mercy was. He simply confessed his sins to his loving and merciful father, leaving off the part in his "confession" about being treated as a hired hand and trying to work off his debt. You see, it took being in the presence of dad to realize that it was *truly impossible* to pay off that *huge debt* and *fractured relationship* that he had created. No amount of "can-do" attitude and good deeds could repair the irreparable damage that had been done. If he was going to be restored to a right relationship with dad, *it was completely up to dad*. It didn't matter what the prodigal son did or thought. **It mattered what dad did and thought.** And dad spared *no mercy, no love, no expense*. Dad pulled out all the stops in welcoming his once-dead, but now-alive son home, fully restored.

And this is why I don't really like the title of this parable. It's not really about the son. This parable is really about the prodigal dad. Many people don't realize this. Many people *wrongly* believe that to be prodigal means to be wayward and corrupt; missing in action for all the wrong reasons. **That's not what the word means!** To be prodigal means to be "*recklessly extravagant; to be lavish with one's wealth; to spare no costs; to withhold nothing.*" Was the foolish son "prodigal?" Yes! He spent his riches recklessly and foolishly on all the wrong things, and he paid the price for his *recklessly wasteful foolishness and selfishness*.

However...dad, in a very right and good way, was *every bit as prodigal* in lavishing his love and his mercy and his grace upon his humbled, repentant son. ***This is why this parable still speaks to us today.*** Our life, our forgiveness, our salvation—our everything—is a result of our heavenly Father's prodigal love and compassion for us. ***Talk about prodigal?*** Our heavenly Father **crucified** His one and only Son—for us! He was the complete payment for all our sins. Because of this all-redeeming, prodigal love we have **more** than the Father's mercy; we have His grace.

You see, mercy is not getting what you deserve. Grace is getting what you don't deserve. God doesn't strike us down for our sin. That's mercy. More than that, He restores us to the royal household. That's grace. We've done **nothing** to

deserve this restoration, nor could we, and yet He does it. He comes to us to take us up in His arms. God didn't wait for us to bring His terms for restoration that we could both work with. He didn't wait for us to return home to heaven to work out a deal with Him for mercy and grace. *That would be impossible!* Our deadly sinful condition prevents us from ever setting foot in the heavenly household of eternal life.

But this is precisely why God comes down to us. He comes to us where we're at. He takes on our flesh. More than that, He takes that flesh to the cross in order to save us and redeem us; to restore us and make us His own. He pours out His *rich and undeserved* gifts of mercy and grace upon us. Look no further than the font. Here He *lavishly* pours out His baptism upon us, clothing us with the royal robe of Christ's righteousness. We are His holy children, graciously, lavishly, prodigally restored to Him and His royal household. Look to this altar. Look to this rail. The never-ending and all-sufficient feast of victory, slaughtered once for all, continues to be set before us. He graciously bids us to eat and drink of this feast of life everlasting, not because we've earned it, but because He loves us.

You know, when you see all these things through the eyes of saving faith; by the working of the Holy Spirit in these, His means of grace, when you come to yourself and come before God; *when you see things for how they truly are*, you almost have to agree with the proverbial elder brother here. **It's not fair. It's not fair at all.** Thank God that He's not fair. Thank God that instead *His love, His grace, and His mercy for us is prodigally unconditional, unwavering, and eternal.*

In the name of our truly prodigal Savior...

AMEN