

## Prodigal Nation

Jesus was simply subverting the whole system . . .

“Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

To understand the parable of the prodigal son, we must first realize the really radical thing Jesus doing here. He is by-passing Jewish Temple religion. He is claiming in the name of God to be able to admit into fellowship *with* God any and all who were simply willing to accept his invitation to become part of the renewed covenant people. The parables in Luke 15 help us understand this powerful and subversive action: In welcoming sinners and eating with them, Jesus is claiming that God would *welcome the sinner* whether or not they had passed through any of the normal channels or been subjected to any of the usual tests of Jewish religiosity.

He is *eating* with them. Table fellowship is central to Jewish spirituality. Food is incredibly symbolic for Jews of what it means to be a pure and holy people before God. Jesus was messing it all up. To eat with *them* was doing irreparable damage to his Messianic claim: Is this the kind of kingdom the *true* messiah would reign over? One that even includes the tax-collectors and sinners. . .?!

The pejorative term “sinner” *am haretz* in Hebrew – literally means “*people of the land.*” It’s an interesting term that came into common use within Judaism after the *return from* the Babylonian exile. You see, when the Jews returned from exile, they came back to the land with a renewed sense of purpose, a fresh new edition of the Scriptures, inspiring leaders like Ezra and Nehemiah and Haggai, and with a deep, passionate commitment to God for the rebuilding their Temple and city. But they didn’t return to an uninhabited land. When they got back to the land, they immediately ran into hostility from the “*people of the land,*” The poorest nobodies who had been left behind when most of the Jews had been deported had intermingled with the pagans neighbour nations and were now “not quite real Jews.” They were the “people of the land, *am haretz*,” the term we translate into English as “the sinners.” So the people the scribes and Pharisees object to Jesus eating with are socially and religiously compromised. And so, in their minds, for Jesus to *eat* with them and *welcome* them was to weaken and hurt the purity of all Israel.

So with historical background in mind, we can now begin to understand the subversive meaning of

### The parables in Luke 15

So he told them this parable "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?"

It seems like a common sense proverb. What’s so devious and undermining about this?

The *shepherd* is a *royal symbol* with deep roots in the Israelite traditions of King

David. The *Messiah* of Israel is the *shepherd* of God's flock. The prophets spoke of *God himself* becoming a shepherd, and *taking back* his stolen flock from the clutches of the false shepherds – Israel's corrupted leadership which had been feeding themselves and not the sheep. (See Ezekiel 34:23ff 37:24). So the parable is about God's coming to his people is to get them back. The parable of the lost sheep is not just about the occasional stray, the outsider, the so-called *sinner*. That would be subversive enough. But it is also a real dig against the grumbling self-righteous Pharisees who are false shepherds who have lost the sheep. So it's not the so-called sinners who are in peril, it's the *nation* Israel is the "lost sheep" among the nations that in danger of being lost. That's pretty subversive.

Then comes the parable of the lost coin. The woman's ten coins are drachmas – each worth about a day's wage. But that's not their real value. They are no ordinary coins. They are possibly part of her wedding ornaments; she's not going to give up until she finds that one lost coin. Then she throws a party that must have cost far more than the face value of the coin. Why? These parables are about much more than the salvation of individual lives that could be lost. They are in fact about. . .

### **God and his Prodigal Nation**

Perhaps you've heard other Gospel sermons on the prodigal son; but right now I need you to just wipe your mind's clean. Come at this story with a clean slate. Because, given what I've just said about the *subversive* nature of Jesus message, this parable also operates on a level we may not have realized before. Remember, *reaction* to these simple stories was so *violent*, Jesus up on a cross. There's a lot more going on in these parables than just a few sinners who need to clean up their act. No. They are about *God* and his covenant people.

In the parable Jesus says, “. . . the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a *distant country*, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living.”

Now, when did *Israel* go off into a distant, pagan country? Isn't the story of prodigal son the story of Israel? in particular of going into *exile* and then returning to the land? In Babylon, Israel was reduced to servitude in a far-flung corner of a pagan empire where they languished until they came to their senses and began to long to return to their own land.

I suggest to you that in the story of the prodigal, Jesus is focusing on a unique moment in history when the Jews realized the spiritual bankruptcy of life in Babylon; and they began crave the covenant relationship with God once more, when the word of God became precious to them; and they longed to return and rebuild and restore the father/child relationship with God.

In Jesus' day, many, if not *most* Jews regarded the exile as still ongoing. They still saw themselves as the *prodigal nation* still ashamed to really return to the father's house as a true son. They were still “feeding the pigs” under Gentile domination over their land and their lives.

If we take this historical interpretation of the parable – that it is really about God and his

prodigal *nation* – the question for Jesus Jewish audience now becomes. . .

### **Who is now standing in our way?**

Who or what is preventing the nation from coming back to God? Many would say “the Romans” or “the sinners.”

In the parable there’s the *older son* who stayed at home. He didn’t go anywhere. He worked the land and tended the herds. And now he resents the return of his younger brother, the wastrel. He’s *opposed* to him being allowed to return home as a favoured son. Is there an historical parallel to that? Yes.

When *Israel* returned from Babylon, there was this mixed multitude in the land, not the least of which were the *Samaritans*: the *am haretz* – the *people of the land*. They are the ones who had remained in the land while the Jews were away in Babylon. And when Israel returned from exile, there was strong negative reaction from the people of the land: who do you Jews think you are? First you go away into your far country, and you live it up in Babylon, meanwhile, we stay here and we muddle along with our farms and our flocks. And now you people suddenly return suddenly with the Emperor blessing and lots of money to rebuild your city and take right over! And we’re supposed to *celebrate* this? We’re supposed to just go along with this?

The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah and Haggai tell the story of a great resentment and resistance towards the return of the prodigal nation to the land. The people of the land stood in the way of the restoration of Jerusalem and the Temple. Now let’s connect that to the story line of Jesus’ parable.

Through Jesus, “tax-collectors and sinners” and even *Gentiles* are being brought into covenant a relationship with God. They’re at the table with him! The party is on. The Father has killed the fatted calf.

Can you see how Jesus is *subverting* Israel’s story in this parable? He is turning the tables on the Pharisees and scribes. If we follow this historical interpretation of the parable it’s quite simply about *God’s offer of hope* for lost of the world. Hope for all! The father/child relationship between God and Israel is now really restored and the sinners and Gentiles are included. But not the way *you* think if you’re a scribe or a Pharisee.

Ezekiel described the return from exile as the dead bones of the nation of Israel rising again to life. The nation that was dead now is alive again! And now, with Jesus, the real return from exile will include a real *resurrection* from the dead. But not the dry bones of a nation but one man in a quiet garden tomb. The first-fruit – the hope, the promise of resurrection of all people at the end of the age. Jesus rose, the first-fruits of all who sleep in their graves.

No one was ready for that. No one expected *that*. No one expected that the new covenant of God with humanity would be sealed in the blood of Jesus the Lamb of God. But it would be and *that act of God* would remove every obstacle for any and all to come to the Father – these *sinners*, yes, even these tax-collectors sitting at my table, yes, even the . . .

## **The Gentile world.**

Jesus says of the prodigal, “ while he was still *far off*, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. “

God knows how far the nations of this world have strayed away from him. But he sees them. His Spirit is running out to meet them. Is it not the mission of the Church to tell the nations the story of Jesus and his love? How the Father longs to put his arms around them and kiss them and bring them to his home?

Maybe you’ve seen this Tim Horton’s ad on TV: It begins with an African man on the phone to his wife. She’s obviously far away. He speaks in an African language but then he says, “I love you. I’ll see you tomorrow.” Then we see him out shopping for warm winter clothes. Next scene, the alarm clock rings on a dark, snowy morning and he makes his way to the airport. And just before he gets to the arrivals area he stops and buys two Tim Horton’s coffees. And then he waits . . . .

And finally *there they are*: his wife and two little girls. And they kiss and there’s tears. And we can’t even imagine how difficult it been for them. How they’ve gone through the long separation and loneliness and endless paperwork and bureaucratic red tape and *waiting*. But now they’re *together* and they’re warm in their new winter clothing and they have Tim Hortons!

That is what this parable’s all about. It’s about salvation through grace apart from the works of the law. The prodigal son is *everybody*. Something universal about it. Something every human being can identify with. No doubt Luke thought about it as he wrote the book of Acts, as the church took the Gospel to the Gentile world. Luke must have seen this parable within the context of this larger story. The Gospel is going to the uttermost parts of the earth. Prodigal nations are returning to God! But there’s still an “older brother” in the story. It’s interesting to compare Luke 15 with *Acts 15*. There, Paul has returned to Jerusalem to report to the Jewish church on the Gentiles coming to Christ. It’s been hard for the Jewish Christians to really accept that the God of Israel is not willing that *any* should perish but that *all peoples* come to know him personally through his Son Jesus Christ. But Paul tells them about the signs and wonders God is doing among the Gentiles through them. And then finally, James, that most Jewish of all the apostles says this: Read Act 15: 13b-19

When it comes to the Gospel. . .

### **Why do we try and make it seem so difficult?**

“ Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But *the father* said to his slaves, "Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.”

That’s grace! God isn’t interested in making us pay for all our past sins and wrongs. He just wants us to *come home*. Tony Campollo says, “ God carries your picture in his wallet.”

The resurrection of Jesus was proof of God’s love and forgiveness, that on the cross the barrier of hostility that human sin had created from the Garden of Eden was now *removed*

and the way was open for the guilty sinner to come home, no questions asked. Through the cross banishment from the paradise of God and the presence of God is now over! The father doesn't need any explanation, he just wants his son to come home. And this resurrection, this forgiveness, this *return* from exile is happening right under the nose of the "elder brother," who in Jesus' parable represents the stay-at-home guardians of the father's house – the scribes and Pharisees, the defenders of Israel's tradition. They had all kinds of scriptural arguments for keeping the sinners at bay. They could quote Torah all day long as to why the kind of people Jesus was eating with should not be included on the guest list.

But the parable doesn't "teach" the tradition of Torah. It creates a new world. Jesus interprets his actions as he moves towards the cross in terms of the fulfilment of the entire story of Israel. Those scribes and Pharisees who object to what he's doing are actually casting themselves in the role once played historically by those Samaritans who opposed the rebuilding of Jerusalem. This parable points to the final clash between Jesus and the official authorities who want him dead.

But Jesus doesn't want them dead. He doesn't want them excluded from the love of his Father. He just wants them to . . .

### **Embrace the kingdom**

And so the Father in the parable addresses his angry eldest son "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. "

The older son is not excluded from the father's house. But he needs to change his outlook. You know what I think angered the older brother the most? The *ring* the father put on his younger brother's finger. Why? Because it was a *signet ring*. It was a ring bearing the father's name; and it meant that the son could now do business in the name of his father simply by pressing that ring on the seal of a document. It was the possession of his father's signet ring that transformed the younger son from a worthless nobody to a son.

His brother didn't like that.

When Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem he came as a *governor* in the Persian empire. He would have had the government seal on his ring. He could do business in the name of the king and the people of the land didn't like that. It made them angry.

The Jewish king at the time of the return was Zerubabel. It means "born in Babylon" He was very insecure on the throne – facing the brunt of hostility from the surrounding peoples. But the LORD says something to him. He says, through the prophet Haggai, "O Zerubbabel my servant. . . I have made you like a signet ring. . . " (Haggai 2: 23) This insecure king would be used by God to leave his mark on the world. He would be upheld by God's hand.

The prodigal son needed to hear that message. What the older brother needed to realize is that nothing had changed in the heart of his father towards him. Nothing would be diminished in his life by welcoming his brother home. But what needed to change was how the older brother *saw* his younger brother and how the younger brother saw *his family*. What

the younger brother needed was some *symbols*: the ring, the robe, the sandals, the killing of the fatted calf.

To us who seek to share the Gospel this parable is about making . . .

### **A Paradigm shift**

Perhaps you've seen this optical illusion before: What do you see? Do you see an old hag? Or a young stylish woman? You can see both. But not at the same moment. The interesting thing about this is that we can see both, but the actual picture never changes.

Sometimes we look at our so-called "prodigals" and we those who are worthless, lazy, useless. Our so-called prodigals need to "smarten up." But if those people hear that often enough they can actually begin to believe it. "Ya, I guess I *am* worthless. . . . But when the prodigal comes to his father, the father helps him see himself in a whole new way. It's a story about forgiveness and eternal life.

When he came home, that young man was really unsure about where he stood with his father, yet as he is given a new robe, ring and sandals. He *needed* that so he could begin to embrace his new life.

The other night I watched the Oscars on TV. I wonder, why is there such a fascination with the celebrity culture? Here are people who, are not bad people, who go to Hollywood and are willing to gamble with *the most important things in life*: their marriages, their children, their mental and physical health, all for a chance to be a part of the Hollywood illusion.

As long as there are sports cars and yachts, and villas

As long as there are entertaining companions, exciting adventures, and the drinks are flowing freely, they can the disgrace in their hearts -- even from themselves. They can deny the fact that they no longer have any honour, or integrity. . . . Then, on almost a weekly basis, we hear of the latest promising talent who has just crashed and burnt. Drugs, sex, Rock and Roll.

Let me suggest to you that the reason why we continue to even be interested in celebrity culture at all is because *they are us*. We are *the prodigal nation*. An nation that needs to return to the grace of the Father. An nation that will long to eat bitter husks that popular culture continues to serve up. It's junk-food for the soul.

But what Jesus offered to the prodigal nation is . . . .

### **The Hope of the Resurrection**

The father says we have to celebrate, "because this brother of yours was dead and has *come to life*; he was lost and has been found.' "

New life in Christ is real and we are invited to share the joy and new life. So what do you see in this story? Can it allow us an opportunity to make a paradigm shift? Does it really ask us to focusing on the ways we wish God would change others? Or is it more about how we should consider today the ways this story can change *our* lives and how we might help others on the way home.

Because "the gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord."

Amen.