

## THE SECOND GREATEST LOVE STORY EVER TOLD

### The Father

Luke 15:11-32

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LISTEN: <http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/the-father/>

What if God is more and different than you thought? Would you want to know? Today, we look at Jesus' picture of God in this parable, reflected through the story of the father and two sons. Someone asked if the older son had a legitimate point, protesting the way the father rewarded the bad behavior of the younger son. But really, think about it. The kindness of God shows up in each of our lives in different ways. The older son had experienced undeserved kindness along the way as well. He just wasn't remembering that at the moment!

Some people object to the father's generosity to the younger son, saying that the kid got off easy, as if grace is cheap. But I would challenge that—big time! When the younger son took off, someone had to cough up that money for his share; someone had to make up the capital lost when he cashed out. And someone had to hire extra an worker. The father paid for the boy's sins! Furthermore, Look at the face of the father in Rembrandt's painting. Do you see the age lines? The weariness and worry? This boy's sin took its toll on the father. Within his own soul, the father had absorbed the hurt and loss. God bears the suffering for our sins. God empties God's Self, and is scarred by our sins. "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself..." (2 Corinthians 5:19).

Someone may even ask, "Why did the father give the younger one his share, anyway?" The picture Jesus paints is one of God who never coerces, never backs us in the corner. God gives us choices and loves us so much that we have the freedom to say no. In other words, God's love makes God powerless. This is the message of the Cross.

Note carefully the father's hands in Rembrandt's work. The left hand—firm, thumb and fingers spread, with some pressure, not so much a touch as a grip [Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, p. 99]. And while the left hand is firm, scholars and art critics notice the right hand is tender, soft and gentle, revealing the two sides to God's nature, dwelling in perfect balance.

Last year, on my trip to Israel, we were waiting in an airport for flight information. Since it was El Al Airlines, there were obviously many observant Jews in the crowd. One little boy in a stroller, so tired of travel, so ready for a real bed, was having a rough time. I heard him moan, "Abba, Abba..." as he reached for his daddy. The tenderness of God came through to me in that moment.

And Jesus goes to some length to picture God as the great banquet-giver. In Jesus' day, most meals were meatless. Meat was a luxury of the well-to-do. Jesus didn't teach us to pray, "Give us this day our daily burger, or our daily chicken breast," but "our daily bread." And even then, with no refrigeration system, one would not kill an entire calf unless there were plenty of people to eat it all up. This is the banquet theme of abundance set before us in Psalm 23:5 and Revelation 19:9. In Christ, God meets the heart hungers of the ages.

Henri Nouwen says it so well. “Here is the God I want to believe in: a Father who, from the beginning of creation, has stretched out his arms in merciful blessing, never forcing himself on anyone, but always waiting; never letting his arms drop down in despair, but always hoping that his children will return so that he can speak words of love to them and let his tired arms rest on their shoulders” [pp. 95-96].

But someone will ask, “Then why don’t I experience God’s love?” The answer? Perhaps you’re not participating in it or giving it away. The only way to God’s love is straight through other people (“this son of yours...this brother of yours...vv. 30, 32). God’s forgiving grace runs right through our relationship with others. That is not optional or negotiable. It just is! “...for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen cannot love God whom they have not seen” (1 John 4:20). Would you be open to a new kind of God? A new kind of faith? Come see what love can do!