

# GOD AND THE REBELLIOUS

by Ray C. Stedman

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The parable of the lost son is the most famous of all our Lord's illustrations. Probably no parable our Lord ever uttered is more pertinent to the times in which we live than this, the story of a rebellious boy. Each day we are confronted with new crises arising from what is called "the rebellious generation." Every news medium flashes before us reports of the insistent demands of the young for "Freedom, now!" We hear on every side the cry for the overthrow of old ways, the call for the destruction of the establishment, and a summons to defiance of all authority. Many workers from college campuses reported to me this past week what the radical elements on the campuses are saying. They are openly advocating that students pay no attention to anything they have learned from their parents. They tell them that parents are completely and totally wrong and urge them not even to bother to tell parents they are wrong but just to ignore them. Our present generation, perhaps more than any for many centuries, is under tremendous pressure to flaunt authority, to overthrow the old ways, to rebel against parental authority, and to destroy the landmarks of the past.

There is no better place in the world to discuss this kind of problem than right here. This is where it ought to be faced. In a congregation of the Church of Jesus Christ all kinds of people are present: the young, the old, the weak, the strong, the rich, the poor, all colors, all backgrounds, all experiences of life. We gather here not to air our own points of view but to listen to God's viewpoint. Some of the young present are sympathetic with what is going on today -- and not without good reason. Some of us who are older likewise have sympathy for it, yet we feel also a sense of fear and dread of the possibilities that might result from the revolt that seethes beneath the surface of the cities of our land. There is no one here who cannot but be helped by seeing the rebellious as God sees them. That is what this parable brings before us.

This parable falls into three movements. There is, first, the departure of the son; then his awakening in the far country; and finally, the joy of the father. Now the first movement,

**And he said, "There was a man who had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that falls to me.' And he divided his living between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living. And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything." {Luke 15:11-16 RSV}**

In this section of the story, Jesus deliberately sets before us two remarkable things. One is the freedom this young man sought, and the other is the freedom he actually found. There is not one of us who does not know how this young man felt while he was living at home. We all know the sense of oppressive authority and the revolt that seethes within against it. We have all had a sense of being held down, restrained, under leash. In the innocent conceit of youth, it is easy for this young man to think that he has already arrived at the place where he is able to handle his own affairs fully and completely. He was undoubtedly approaching that time and he chafes under the restraint of his father, murmuring and grumbling to himself.

It is clear that this boy's idea of freedom is that of so many young people today -- the opportunity to do what you want to do. You can almost hear what he says to himself, "Oh, if I could just go where I want to go and do what I want to do, to go and come back as I please, and not have to answer to anyone. If I could just let my passions have their fling and satisfy myself whenever I like and not be under any law or any rules. If I could be my own boss, and answer to no one. What a great life that would be!" Further, his thought would be, "Why wait for it? It's going to come sometime soon anyhow. Soon I'll be on my own; soon I'll make my own decisions, so why wait? Why not now?"

So he came to his father and said, "Father, you know that soon I'm going to be of age. You've already told me that when I come of age you'll give me a share of your property. But I want it now. Give me the share that belongs to me, and let me take it now." Doubtless his father tried to reason with him. He said to him, "Son, do you really think you have no freedom now? Don't you see that you have a great deal of freedom? Plenty of it? Can't you see that I've given you a great deal of responsibility, and there is much more to come? And don't you understand that you have the run of the house and all this property, and that you are answerable in this home only to me? You don't need to report to anyone else; there is only one to whom you are under obligation."

But it is all to no avail. The boy is determined to have his way. So at last the father gives him his share of the property, and the boy gathers up all his possessions and takes his way into the far country. At first he is sure that he has done the right thing. He rents a home with a great view, and furnishes it with taste. He begins to make friends everywhere, of both sexes. He spends money with a lavish hand, and tries anything and everything, especially those things which had formerly been forbidden him.

Strangely enough, soon everything seems to be mysteriously changed. His body becomes the vehicle of wild passions that sometimes frighten him with their intensity. His health begins to suffer, and he finds that he often wakes up with a dark brown taste in his mouth. He no longer feels vital and alive as he once did. His money begins to dwindle and with it his friends go. He is no longer able to keep up with the expensive crowd he first chose. They leave him in the lurch as soon as his money is gone, and he must seek other friends. He finds that he cannot stand to be alone but must always find some amusement or diversion.

At last hard times hit the country. His money is gone, and now he has to get a job. But because he had not stayed with his father long enough to complete any skill or training, the only job he can get is manual labor, and even that is hard to find. Finally he ends up with a job feeding pigs. There, in the pigsty with an empty purse and an empty belly, he begins to take stock of his empty life.

That brings us to the second movement of the story:

**"But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants.'" And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'" {Luke 15:17-21 RSV}**

Perhaps the most hopeful sentence in this story is the phrase with which this section is introduced, "But when he came to himself." (Years ago I heard a very eloquent black preacher speaking on this parable. He was illustrating what happened to the prodigal son in the far country. He said, "As his money disappeared he had to sell his clothes in order to eat. He took off his shoes and sold those. Then he took off his coat and sold that. Then he took off his shirt and sold that. And then he came to himself!")

Our Lord is saying that no one who is in rebellion is ever himself. He is living in a dream world, a world of fantasy, unreality. But now at last the boy begins to see himself exactly as he is. Reality breaks through. When he takes stock of his life he discovers that his is chained to his urges. His passions have so developed within him that he has to satisfy them in any way he can. Yet even when he does so, they are not satisfied.

A high school boy said to me some time ago, "I don't know what's the matter with me. I see a girl, and I say to myself, 'If I could just go with that girl, I'd be the happiest guy on earth!' And then I meet her, and go out with her. We go together for awhile, and then I find myself saying, 'If I could just get rid of this girl I'd be the happiest guy on earth!'"

In our story the boy finds that he is chained to his homesickness. He cannot forget his home, so he must keep himself amused and diverted, his attention engaged. He cannot stand to be alone. Every time he comes into the

house he switches on the TV or the radio, anything to keep him occupied. He finds he is chained to his degrading work. He does not like it; he hates it. There is nothing appealing about it, nothing challenging in it, but it is all he has to keep himself alive, and he has got to stay with it. He must do something to live. Further, he finds himself subject to a man who cares nothing about him, who uses him as a mere tool to get his work done, but has no interest in him as a person.

One day the realization hits him with full force. If he cannot avoid certain things, but must do other things, then he is no longer free! Above everything else he wanted to be free. He sought for freedom and longed to find it, was ready to sacrifice anything to gain it. Now he knows that he is the least free of all men. And he suddenly realizes that this has been true for a long time; he knew it inwardly even when he still had money. Others thought he was carefree, able to do what he wanted, but inside he knew that the chains were beginning to draw around him and his freedom was a lie. That was his first realization, that he had no freedom at all.

Second, as he sat among the pigs in the pigsty, he realized that all the things that he once had, he had gotten from his father. His possessions, his money, his clothes, his food, his drink, even his very body, the passions of which he had unleashed. He had gotten them all from him. He had been living on the capital of another, and had made no investment himself.

Then a third thing hit him. He realized that everything he now wanted -- even needed -- was to be found only in the father's house. That is where true freedom lay. As he looked back on those days with his father, he realized that there was freedom. That was when he was the most free. That was when he could be what he wanted to be. That was when he could fulfill the dreams of his heart, and when he still had his health and his chastity. And even now the things he wanted and needed were in the father's house. He yearned for food, for he was hungry, but the only place he knew where he could get it was in the father's house. He yearned for friends and for companionship. He was all alone and no one gave him anything; but there it all was, waiting in the father's house. He yearned for significance, for some way to redeem his ruined life. The only chance he could think of was to go back to his father.

The fourth thing that came to him, as he sat in the pigsty, was that he had lost all claim upon his father. He could not go back after he had been so smart, so sure that he was right, and say to his father, "Father, I've come back to be your son." He realized he had lost his right to sonship. So he thought up a little speech that he would make. Jesus tells us what it is: He said to himself, "I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants.'" He reasoned, "Even the hired servants in my father's house have something to eat, and they have spare time in which to enjoy themselves. They're better off than I by a long ways. I haven't the gall to go back to be my father's son again, but I'll go back and be his hired servant." So he rose to return to the father.

Now this last realization to which he came is really very important. There are some who have suggested that this boy need not have come back saying what he said; that he could have come back and said to his father, "Father, here I am, and you ought to be glad I went for I grew more mature in the far country. The experience of evil which I've been through has made a man of me. Now I've come back to be your son, and you can be glad that I tried the far country." One writer even goes so far as to suggest that he urge his older brother to go to the far country, that he might sin a bit and thus grow up to be a man! But you find that there is nothing of that here; nothing at all.

I am sure that if this boy had said that, the father would have still welcomed him back. The father loved this boy, and he would have still put on him the robe, the ring, and called for the fatted calf. But the problem would have been the son would have been unable to forgive himself. The torments inside would have remained. His conscience would have gone on accusing him, and, wracked with guilt, he could not have assumed again the position of a son.

I run into many people like that. They have never been able to forgive themselves because they have never taken the position this boy took. They have never realized that they have no claim whatsoever upon God, upon his love or grace.

That is why Jesus tells us this story. He wants us to see how this boy is set completely free. When he comes back to the father, he comes without any justification whatsoever. There is simply the acknowledgment that he has no claim and that all is up to the father.

Then we come to the third movement of the story:

**"But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to make merry." {Luke 15:22-24 RSV}**

Here is the joy of the father. What a happy note to end on -- for everyone but the fatted calf!

The father's joy is unrestrained. He sees the lone figure on the horizon and runs to meet him. He throws his arms about him and kisses him. The boy starts his little speech, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." The father knows what he is going to say next and he stops him, does not let him say it, but cries, "Bring quickly the best robe -- and a ring -- and prepare the fatted calf." He calls for the robe, the mark of sonship. He calls for a ring, the sign of authority. And he calls for a feast, the display of honor. In other words he puts this boy right back into the full relationship of a son within the family circle. He begins to honor him and treat him as a grown son.

Now, how can this father be so joyful? There were many years in my life when I read this parable and could understand fully the feeling of this boy. I too had been a rebellious son, and I knew how he felt; I could identify with him. I knew what the far country was like, and what the joy of coming home was. But now, as I read the parable, I find myself identifying with the father and understanding something of what went on in his heart. Why is this father so joyful, why is he so gloriously happy? It is as he tells us. It is because, in his thinking, the boy had been dead -- but now is alive. He was lost -- but now is found. He had almost given up, he had almost lost hope. These words tell us that behind the joy of the father is the dark background of agony which he endured while this boy was gone.

Dr. Helmut Thielicke's title for his commentary on this parable is not "The Prodigal Son," as we call it, but "The Waiting Father." Many of the commentaries point out that what Jesus is after is not to show us the boy's heart, but the father's. It is a picture of the heart of God.

The father's agony began when he first realized that he had to let this boy go. He did not want to. He knew what lay ahead, and he knew it was needless. He knew that he could have spared this boy the heartache, the loneliness, the shame and degradation of the far country; that he could have saved him from these black marks upon his soul. Had the boy been patient, and waited a bit, and allowed his father to work out his purposes, he could have brought him into the full enjoyment of the liberty he sought, but without the heartache, without the shame. Yet the father knew he could not do it without the boy's full cooperation, that, when he had reached this stage of development, the boy must cooperate with him in it. He had to wait, and agree to wait, through the fulfillment of the father's plans. But if he would not wait the father could not force him; he could not make him do it. So there came a time when, with his heart breaking, the father gave the boy the money and let him go.

Then there followed long months and years when reports came filtering back from the far country of what was happening. The older boy heard them also and flings them in the father's face a little later. Every bit of gossip was like a knife wound in the father's heart. His own son, in this kind of state! Each day deepened the ache in his heart, but he never fully gave up looking for him. Though he finally reached the place where he thought the boy would never come back, something within him kept his eyes on the horizon, though every look was a pain, and every pain left a scar.

If we can see the father's agony as Jesus intended us to see it, then we will have the answer to the question many ask about this parable. They say, "Why is there no reference here to the cross? How can Jesus tell the story of a rebellious son, a prodigal boy returning to his father, without a single reference to his own cross and his redemptive love?" The answer is that the agony of this father's heart, running through the background of

this story, unexpressed but clearly there, is the picture of the cross. The cross is the expression of God's agony over the rebellion of man. That is what Paul says in Romans 5, "The proof of God's amazing love is this, that when we were yet sinners Christ died for us," {cf, Rom 5:8}. Again, to the Corinthians, he says, "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself," {2 Cor 5:19 KJV}.

There is a mistaken doctrine of the atonement which says that Jesus, upon the cross, was placating the vengeance of an angry God; that he was standing between the poured out wrath of God and man, stopping God from wreaking terrible vengeance upon the rebellion of man. There is some truth in that for it is true that God's justice must be satisfied. But we can never understand the depths of the atonement unless we realize that God's love was expressed in the cross, that God was "in Christ, reconciling the world." Behind the reconciliation is the ache and agony of a Father's heart. "He who spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all; how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?" {cf, Rom 8:32}. Is that not the story of the prodigal son?

The final lesson of this story is that there is a new beginning that awaits us in God. There is a full restoration that is ours whenever we stupidly and foolishly rebel. There is not one person here who has not so rebelled and does so even yet. But restoration is only because the Father has already borne the hurt himself. The agony has already reached him. He has quenched the fire of our rebellion in the blood of his Father's heart.

You and I know that we are rebels. There is not one of us who can point the finger at another. We all rebel. We rebel in hypocrisy and cover it over with self-righteousness. We act as though we are good and decent and respectable, but if we admitted the truth, inside there is defiance and flaunting and desiring our own way. We take matters in our own hands and go off into some far country of the spirit. How many times God has healed us and welcomed us back without a word of condemnation. When we have come, saying, "Father, we are not worthy to be your sons. We don't deserve your love and your mercy," he never lets us finish the sentence. Instead, he calls for the restoration of all that was ours, all that he wanted us to have -- the ring, the robe, and the merry feast.

So we cannot point our finger at anyone who lives in rebellion against God. We can only say of them, "They are our kind of people." We can only help them find their way back from the far country. We know well the loneliness of it. We know the agony of it, the heartache of it. We know the emptiness and the longing for significance and love and grace. But this is the message Jesus wants us to learn, and what we are to convey to the world around us -- that God waits to restore fully those who turn back to him.

Those who come like this boy, saying, "Father, I've blown it. I've messed it up. Lord, I don't know how to straighten it out. but you know, and I can only commit myself to you." To that, the Lord Jesus makes clear, God responds as this father did.

## **Prayer**

Our Father, how grateful we are that through the difficulties of our lives and through the clarity of Scripture you are teaching us that we have only two choices: either to be the slave of one master, or the child of another. We pray that in each moment of decision we may choose to be the child of a father's love. We are not made to stand alone. No one is. We cannot run our own affairs. We are dishonest if we think we can. We are dependent upon you, Lord. We have made us that way, and now we glory in it. We ask you to break the back of rebellion within us, and help us to choose your plan and your program. To learn to wait when you ask us to, and learn to trust, and know that "freedom, now," means slavery; but freedom when you give it means liberty in the fullest sense of the word. We thank you for this lesson, in Jesus' name, Amen.

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