

The Prodigal son

Luke 15:11-32

Jesus tells this parable specifically to the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. They were careful adherents to the law and were complaining that Jesus received sinners and was eating with them.

The prodigal son represents the tax collectors and sinners with whom Jesus associated.

The parable starts with the sentence: "A father had two sons."

The youngest son is asking his father for his share of the estate. Such a request means in village society only one thing: "The younger son is impatient for his father's death." The division of the father's wealth would naturally come only at the very end of the father's life. It is certainly unthinkable for any son to request his portion of the family wealth while his father is still alive. Without protest, the father gives him his share. The father offers an unexpected outpouring of love. Actually, this son is saying: "Father you may fall dead. I don't have a father anymore." He breaks all ties with his father and with his parental house. He wants his freedom. He wants to enjoy life. He chooses deliberately to wound his father's heart and break all his relationships with the family. The elder son certainly knows the story. In a village community everything is known immediately by everyone. The conversation between the father and the younger son would have been heard by the servants or perhaps by the older son. But the older son does not want to be the mediator. The mediator can work out a solution that both sides can accept. It is up to the older son to step in and try to reconcile his father with his brother. But he is silent. He refuses. That means that things are not as they should be between him and his brother or between him and his father. Maybe the older brother is arrogant so that his behaviour contributes to the rupturing of the youngest son's relationship with his father. Then the father. He gives his younger son what he asks. No father in the Middle East would do so. Rather he would refuse and punish his son. The father looks like our heavenly Father who gives us freedom to reject his love. The father is still hoping that the relationship with his younger son will be restored. After this son receives his money, he goes to a foreign country and uses his money for a sinful life. He is not thinking about the love of his broken-hearted father. The money is gone quickly, and famine overtakes the foreign country. The son is becoming hungry. He is in big trouble, and he goes to one of the citizens of that country who is sending him to the fields to feed pigs. An average Jew didn't want to do anything with pigs, because for him, pigs were unclean.

While he is feeding the pigs the son desires to eat their food. But no one gives him any food. He ends up between the pigs and the mud. He is desperate and he is thinking about his father and the hired servants of his father who have enough bread. He is thinking about his sins, and he repents. He decides to go home, and he will say to his father: "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 realizes that he has broken his father's heart.

When he is going home, his father sees him from afar and feels compassion for him. The father is running to him, he embraces him and kisses him. In the Middle East a man of his age and position would never run. It is his compassion that leads the father to race out to reach his son. There is an unexpected costly love from his father. That love was always there but the son never saw it. But now his surrender to his father's will is complete. He allows himself to be found. The father organizes a party. He says to his servants: "Bring the best robe and put it on him; and put a ring on his finger 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 begin with the feast."

The father restores the broken relationship through grace alone. The Pharisees were complaining that Jesus accepted sinners. Jesus accepts them with open arms, because the sinners know that they are totally unworthy.

Now the older son is in the field and as he comes and draws near to the house, he hears music and dancing, and he calls one of the young boys and asks him what is going on. The young boy tells him that his brother has come home and that his father has killed the fatted calf because he received him with peace. The older son becomes very angry and refuses to enter the house.

The father invites the eldest son to join the celebration, but he refuses. He feels cheated because he has lived in obedience to his father, but he has never received a goat to make merry with his friends. Does he love his father? He lives with his father in the same house, but does he know his father? He is full of anger and bitterness. His father is kind to him and says, "I am always with you and all that I have belongs also to you."

Who is the most important person in this parable? Is it the youngest son, who does not care about the law of God? Is it the eldest son, the conformist, who is always critical and does not see the joy and grace that a life with God will give?

No, the father is the central person in this parable. He is full of mercy for his youngest son and for the eldest.

Henri Nouwen wrote a beautiful book about this parable.

In this book you can read a lot about his own spiritual journey. When he was thinking about the question of which son he looked up to most, a friend said to him: "Henri, whether you are the youngest or the eldest son, you know that you, finally are called to become the father." And she went on: "Henri, so long as I have known you, you have tried hard to please people and to be recognized. Now it is the time to become a father who welcomes his children without asking them something, without demanding something in return from them."

Become like the father.....Henri Nouwen was already in his sixties when this was said to him. Do you have to be a little older, don't you need to have some life experience before you are able to become a father? This is about spiritual maturity. The apostle Paul writes in the first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 2 verse 6: "Yet I do proclaim a message of wisdom to those who are spiritually mature."

That grace of the Father has everything to do with the crucified Christ. The crucifixion of Christ makes the indwelling of God's grace possible. To follow after Christ is the way to spiritual maturity and you have to live life to the fullest in the kingdom of God.

But can we do that? Shall we ever be able to look at our neighbours without judgement? Can we forgive them seventy times seven?

Is it possible to get an inexhaustible indwelling of grace and compassion for the youngest sons and for the eldest sons?

The youngest son shows repentance, and his father arranges a feast for him to welcome him home.

Then the eldest son. He is the example of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. They are an example of many people in the church today. Are there not a lot of eldest sons and daughters in the church who do a lot of work for the church and who come regularly to the church services? But they complain. They are often angry, and they won't have it, if their faithfulness is not seen and praised, and if in the church sometimes there seems to be more interest in outsiders, in people who live apart from God than in them.

Jesus puts it sharply. It must have been a slap in the face for the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. The eldest son became furious and did not want to come in. And the father does the same as for the youngest son. He goes to the eldest son, who is saying: "That worthless son of yours, who has spoiled everything that is precious and you killed the fatted calf for him."

Because that is why the eldest son resents his father. He resents the fact that he is a wasteful father.

Tim Keller wrote a book about Jesus with the title "The Prodigal God"; the God who is wasting his grace, who throws grace to the winds, the God who acts as though the bottom of the treasury of his grace will never come into view. That is so annoying. Generosity - that's just beautiful. A gracious God. But the father in this parable is wasting his grace. Eldest sons cannot stand this. It conflicts with their proud obedience, their measured loyalty. Keller writes in his book that the traditional church in the Western world is full of eldest sons and daughters. Because of this, the church is not very attractive.

In this parable the father gives a lot of his grace, but the sacrifice of Christ on the cross is not mentioned. Benedictus the sixteenth has written a book about Jesus, and he asks: "Who represents the father in this parable? We are used to saying: "That is God - the Father of Jesus Christ." But this is not so obvious. Because if we reflect on the situation in which Jesus tells this parable, then we see this. There are the tax collectors and the sinners, the youngest sons who come to listen to Jesus. And there are the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who look down upon the tax collectors and the sinners and who are angry with Jesus. If the youngest son represents the tax collectors and the sinners and if the eldest son represents the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, then the father represents Jesus. And if we see the father in this parable with arms wide open, then we see the shadow of the cross. So, we can see that it costs the Father everything to respond in this way to his youngest son and to his eldest son. Jesus shows in the way He acts that he is the revelation of the One who he always calls my Father. Now we understand the process of becoming spiritually mature, the process of learning to live in the kingdom of God. That coincides with becoming like the Father. On a deep level, this is the call in this parable - not that we recognize ourselves in the youngest son, the freebooter, nor in the eldest son, the conformist, the angry, hard worker, who doesn't feel appreciated - no, this is the deepest call: that we become imitators of Christ, that we waste grace in our lives, fling away grace, squander grace on... yes, on whom actually?

Waste grace on whom?

Becoming like the Father means first to have the courage to embrace the youngest son, who is in each of us and also to embrace the eldest son who is also in each of us. Let us not look outside but inside, into ourselves. Let us have patience with the youngest son or daughter within ourselves. The son or daughter who wants to be free but not in God's way, but in the way of self-discovery, of self-actualization. On this earth we will never be completely free of the youngest son or daughter in us.

Let us be aware of the grace of God for us. That is the same for the eldest son or daughter in us. God's mercy is so wonderful. God is saying to us: "Everything that belongs to me, is also for you." The apostle Paul writes in the letter to the Ephesians chapter five verse two: "Since you are God's dear children, you must try to be like Him. Your life must be controlled by love, just as Christ loved us and gave His life for us as a sweet-smelling offering and sacrifice that pleases God."