Parable of the Prodigal Son: *A Corrective Relational Experience*

The *Parable of the Prodigal Son* in *Luke 15:11-32* is primarily Jesus sharing his experience of his heavenly father. Kenneth Bailey (1992), one of the foremost scholars in middle eastern culture, views Jesus as a metaphorical theologian with his extensive use of parables and everyday examples in his teaching. Jesus uses this parable to define the term "father" in the story.

Jesus was also commenting on those in the audience while he was teaching - the Pharisees, represented by the old brother, and those viewed as "sinners," represented as the younger brother. We aim to "*rediscover its authentic Middle Eastern cultural assumptions and to understand its theological content in light of those assumptions*" (Bailey, 1992, p. 109). But many other principles regarding human personality, relationships, growth, and healing were presupposed in what Jesus said. We will discover these also, especially as they relate to "*corrective emotional and relational experiences*."

I want you dead.

11 Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So, he divided his property between them.

We don't know precisely why the prodigal son wanted his inheritance and out of the family. One possibility was as the younger son had a dutiful older brother who did everything right; he knew he could never live up to that kind of performance level. He would never be good enough. So instead of working harder or isolating themself, he rebelled, not feeling he would ever measure up. He was also convinced that the father looked at things this way – performance, obedience, and doing the right things were the main things in living a responsible, holy life. But from the end of the story, we know the younger son misunderstood the father's true heart, which was more relational and based on grace and forgiveness.

We also need to realize that there were more profound and more negative feelings in the prodigal son instead of casually asking for his inheritance. When the prodigal son asked for his share of the estate, in Middle Eastern culture, that is unheard of. Essentially, he is saying that he wished his father was dead. In the Jewish culture, this ask would never have occurred because no law or custom entitles the son to the father's inheritance while the father is living (Bailey, 1992). The traditional father had only one response. He would be angry, even rageful, refuse the request, and then drive the son out of the house either verbally or physically. The son would be dead to the family. (Bailey, 1992)

So, it is worth noting that the father's response starts as a "*corrective emotional and relational experience*." He responds very differently than the son expected and that the Jewish culture. The father can contain his son's misunderstanding of who he is, his resentment, and the rage hidden in his passive-aggressive request while still drawing close to him. But he has to wait for a later experience with his son for all the elements of a "*corrective emotional and relational experience*" to be there that will result in profound growth and healing.

13 "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country, and squandered his wealth in wild living. 14 After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. 16 He longed to fill his stomach with the pods the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

The younger son did not stick around because of the robust culture in the Jewish village. The elders and most others would be outraged at the prodigal son's request and abhorred that the father granted it without confrontation. The looks of condemnation and the withdrawal of relationships created a powerfully shaming atmosphere. In the household, we can assume from the elder's son's later response, when the prodigal returns, that the same atmosphere would also exist. So, the prodigal son sells everything quickly and takes off to a place he hopes will be more affirming, where he would have more importance. Both of these are lacking in the home, according to his experience. It will be much easier to spend his inheritance without all the shameful looks he would get if he stayed in his village.

Of course, true to his impulsive and entitled nature, he blew through the money quickly. Then a severe famine happened, and he found himself in need. But the shame of returning home made him explore other possibilities. Ironically the only job he could get was one that once again went entirely against the Jewish culture he was raised in. Jews were not to come in contact with pigs. There also could be another passive-aggressive decision that expresses the anger he has at his father. Unfortunately, he didn't have the strength to stand up to his father, or so he thought.

I have a plan.

17 "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! 18 I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. 19 I am no longer worthy of being called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' 20 So he got up and went to his father

So often, we think the prodigal son saw the error of his ways and was repentant when we read the phrase, "He came to his senses." He wasn't. He was just hungry and needed a warm place to stay. The phrase, *When he came to his senses"* means he figured out how to manipulate his father once again without being direct in what he needed. His focus was still on himself. If he were repentant, we would have heard hints of "I have shamed my father before the community," "I have rejected my father's love and caused him great hurt," or "I have cared for nothing and no one but myself." But we don't. (Bailey, 1992, p. 132)

Instead, he rehearsed a mainly manipulative speech to avoid humiliation from his father and the Jewish community. For his solution to work, he had to convince his father. So, his first line, *Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you,* is just like Pharaoh's confession to Moses and Aaron during the locusts (Exodus 10:16). Pharaoh said it to "work" Moses. The prodigal has no remorse, repentance, or change of heart. He just wanted to "work" his father. He knew he had to convince his father to give him a chance to become a craftsman for his plan to work. A craftsman was a "hired servant" in first-century Jewish culture. (Bailey, 1992)

It was so important to be given a chance as a craftsman because it was the only way he believed he could get back into the household. In the first-century Jewish culture (and even today), there is no such thing as a "forgiven son." He either returns as a servant, which doesn't get paid and is too below him (his sense of entitlement is still there), or an artisan that does. He needs to get paid for the plan he developed in a faraway country to work. His goal was to earn enough money to pay back his lost inheritance. This would settle his account, which would help restore his honor in the community.

We know this because of the Arabic and Greek meaning of the phrase, "*I am no longer worthy of being called your son."* It is not a statement of him never being worthy. Instead, it refers to him not being worthy now. So he can earn back his restored status in time. This reveals those deep feelings he has carried around in his heart about himself not being worthy because he doesn't perform as well as his older brother. He felt everything was about performance. You were loved only if you performed well. If you didn't, you were shunned or challenged to do better. There was no concept of being a forgiven son who could be loved when he was deeply messed up. There was no concept of relationships being more important than performance and achievement. The only way to be restored was to shape himself up and work hard to earn his way back into the graces of his Father and the community.

Furthermore, he did not want to be reunited with his family. He wanted to be a self-supporting craftsman who did not live at home. The anger and resentment were still there for his father and the family's culture. He did not like performing for his father's love because he was always less than his older brother. Even more importantly, he did not understand the father's true heart. His father's love was not based on performance and achievement (which we will soon find out); it was very accepting even when someone would screw up and be angry. (Bailey, 1992)

So, as he returns, he is still full of anger, resentment, and misunderstanding. He still bases his worth and identity on performance rather than relationships and doesn't want to reconcile or live with his father and the rest of the family. He is far from repentant.

I Have a Plan Too

It wasn't a plan. The father was just being himself but made sure his son would experience it more fully without much room for a different interpretation. He decided to be more transparent so the son could feel his genuine attitude. He wanted his son to experience that his love was not based on performance and being a good boy who never sinned. His love was a deep desire for his son, that he was more special because of his relationship with the son than his obedience (which he already demonstrated by giving him his inheritance) and achievements.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. 21, "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy of being called your son. 22 "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. 24 For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So, they began to celebrate

The father, seeing his son afar off, took off running. There is so much more to this; we will explore each part. First, he was looking for his son to return every day. He was hoping he would return and would be thinking about this throughout the day. Other Jewish fathers would not be looking for their sons as intentionally as this father. They would have been glad to have gotten rid of their troublemaking, embarrassing, underperforming son who brought him shame and disgrace in the community. They would have just waited for him to knock on the door. They were not thinking about him and if he would decide to choose to come home. This sealed the deal, and they gave up on him changing. They would have his mother answer the door and tell him, "Your father will be with you briefly; wait here."

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Secondly, the father would have had to run through the village and pull up his robe. His ankles would be exposed. In the Jewish culture, this is extremely humiliating. He could have avoided this if he had just stayed home and waited for his son to arrive.

Thirdly, the other Jewish fathers and religious leaders would not only wait to talk to the Prodigal Son but probably put him on a strict regime for maturing into the Jewish son he should be. No one would throw him a party nor give him a new clean set of clothes and jewelry.

The father's relational experience differed from the Prodigal Son's feelings about his Father.

The father runs through the village to the son mainly to prevent humiliation if the son walks through the town to his home. The father decided to take on the shame and guilt so the son would not be overwhelmed. Much like Jesus did for us on the cross. (Bailey, 1992)

Another significant issue was that the father had no idea why the son was returning. All the father knew was that he could come home to ask for more money. We now see the son returns home not because he is repentant but because he is hungry and cold and wants to earn his way back into the family and village to escape once again.

When the father arrived and hugged and kissed him, he probably could smell the stench of pigs, alcohol, and, if the rumors were true, a different woman's perfume. Notice that the father didn't even inquire why he was coming home. He was glad to see him, even amid his filth and rebellion (relationship over performance). He highly valued his relationship with the son, missed him, and deeply loved him. This begins the "*corrective emotional and relational experience,*" which will change the son's life forever.

At this moment of throwing his arms around the son and kissing him repeatedly, the father created a compelling experience (specifically around those deep, internal, and notably judgmental feelings his son had about himself) without saying any words. He saw his youngest son's wrong choices, impulses, and behaviors and that he had not yet changed, yet he could deeply love his son in those "bad parts" as much as the "good parts." He could experience both the good and the bad in his son and love him deeply.

We know that the son was able to experience this "grace-filled" relational experience in the moment and very quickly. First, he could feel his shame deeply as the father hugged and kissed him. Then, it all came rushing back as powerfully as it had been there before he left. But, the son realized he had misunderstood the father's heart because what he was experiencing differed from what he expected. He would never have guessed the father would be so accepting of his colossal failure and that he would not only be forgiven but immediately restored to his position as a son with all the respect and honor. So, how do we know all this took place? Because he intentionally dropped the last line of his rehearsed speech, "Make *me one of your hired servants*." He realized he no longer had to perform or earn back in. He no longer had to be manipulative.

The older son misunderstood too.

> *25 "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came to the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 So he called one of the servants and asked him what was happening. 27 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' 28 "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So, his father went out and pleaded with him. 29 But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years, I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' 31 "'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"*

This deep, hidden shame is in the older brother too. However, he dealt with it through performance and was very successful at it. But the father's response to the younger son takes away this defense and exposes the older brother's shame that has always been there. It is too painful to feel, so he defends against it with rage so he can't handle it. He no longer has performance because his father took that away. In addition, he is furious at the father's reaction because the older son has internalized this value so much that he does not understand how the father could do this. His younger brother has not earned the right (i.e., performance) to be reinstated. He is so outraged that he refuses to come inside. So, the father goes out to him just like he did with the prodigal son. The father focuses on relationships, not performance, so he can rejoice, reinstate, and celebrate. First, the son's true feelings come out when he says, "*All these years, I've been slaving for you.*" The word he chose, "*slaving*," tells us he resents his father (just like the prodigal son) and the pressure he felt to be the good, obedient son - which is him misunderstanding the father's heart. Then the older son reveals how he feels duped when he says, "*You are pulling a fast one. All these years, I thought it was all about performance, so that is what I did. Now you are demonstrating it is something different.*" The father reinforces how he misunderstood his heart when he said they could celebrate all this at any time; it did not have to be around performance. "*You are always with me; everything I have is yours."* I loved and respected you regardless of your routine. Ironically, we never know if the elder son will come back inside.

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So, here is how significant, lasting change happened for the Prodigal Son and how it can happen for you or how you can bring it to others. Change happens more than someone telling you to think or behave differently.

1. The prodigal son did not hide his true feelings about himself and his father. He was ready to go and get out of this crazy Jewish lifestyle; in one sense, he was vulnerable and courageous in another.
2. The father honored those feelings even though his son misunderstood his heart. He did not see it as condoning where the son was at, but he could see the more profound feelings underneath his behavior and talk. He knew he had to demonstrate acceptance, especially in the wrong areas, which would lead to changed behavior.
3. The father also knew that simply telling him his thoughts were distorted and his dysfunctional feelings would not work. He understood that our brains are relational and emotional, and for our brains to change, we need more than just logical words. He knew the fastest, most profound change occurs when a person experiences a different kind of relational experience than he had. This is why grace is so powerful and life-changing.
4. The father waited for the opportunity to demonstrate how different his heart was from what his son experienced. But, first, he had to determine the relational experience needed precisely.
5. He got that opportunity when the son returned, still thinking he could earn back in. So, he demonstrated that he loved his son in the midst of him doing wrong things or having bad, impulsive feelings of hate and disgust.
6. The son immediately felt the difference because it was relational first (an experience). Then the words the father put to it would solidify and deepen the understanding.
7. The prodigal son could internalize this new, corrective relational experience because God created our brains to be more social/emotional than driven by logic and reason. This immediately changed his feelings about himself, others, and the world.
8. We must collect these relational interactions to grow in our faith. That is why Jesus left us the church because it is to be primarily a place that puts relationships to the forefront and creates safety. The two significant metaphors that Jesus, Paul, and other New Testament writers use for when people would gather in Ekklesia are body and family (see Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community,* chapter 9, or *click here* for a summary). Both are highly relational metaphors because giving us the purpose of gathering as a church – to enhance our relationships with each other so we can make all things and all people right and lovable. This creates lasting change; even with those deep, negative feelings, you are tempted to hide and put your best self forward. But as we have these different relational experiences than the ones that created those feelings in the first place, they create new neural pathways that eventually replace and delete the old ones. Your brain is literally "renewed" (Romans 12:1 – what Paul was getting at), and you are becoming the "new creation" that God promised us to be in his new family – that is full of these "*corrective emotional and relational experiences."*

Conclusion

For each of us, the Father's heart is often different than we imagine because we assume he loves us in the same way as some of those hurtful relationships we have experienced early on and presently. It is only when we have a different relational experience (i.e., a *corrective emotional and relational experience*) with the Father or another close friend (I John 4:11-14; Ephesians 4:16) that these old, deeply embedded feelings about God, ourselves, others, and the world begin to change. God designed our brains so that new, healthy relational experiences will eventually delete the old feelings and clear down to the synaptic level. At the level of neuroscience (*click here* for a summary of the latest, cutting-edge neuroscience findings that support this – Bruce Ecker's book, *Unlocking the Emotional Brain)*, this is what Paul means when he uses the term "*renewing of your mind*." We are relational human beings, and as we have these new relational experiences with healthy, safe people in God's family and body, they begin to replace the old relational experiences. But we must experience it from another person while feeling all the shame. Then, as that person draws close to us while we handle the guilt and shame, the stain begins to dissolve. This is what grace is all about, both from the Father and our "brothers and sisters."

References

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