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Sermon notes/follow-up

The Parable of the Crazy Father (and His Prodigal SonS)
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Frankly, this sermon just didn't "flow" the way I had hoped. I've wanted to preach on this parable for years, and I don't feel like I came close to doing it justice. But perhaps it's not even possible for a sermon to do justice to the story Jesus told. Still, I wish my delivery had been better and I had been able to better emphasize a couple of key points that I had intended to develop with more clarity. As usual these notes are just some rough thoughts that I came up with during sermon prep, but which didn't make it into the sermon on Sunday. Hopefully some folks will find them helpful, at least as a supplement to the sermon.

This passage is often called "The Parable of the Prodigal Son." There are at least two problems with that title.

First, Lk. 15:3 identifies the three mini-stories in the rest of the chapter as "this parable" – that is, as a single parable with three segments, or one story looked at from three angles. The three metaphors of the lost sheep, lost coin, and lost sons represent one overarching story. For convenience, we can refer to them as three distinct parables, but it is important to remember that Luke (and therefore Jesus) treat them as a unit. The three sections are mutually interpretive.

Just one example of how this helps us: Lk. 15:7 and 15:10 mention repentance. The word is missing in the account of the young son in the third section. But obviously he must have repented because of the prominence of repentance in the earlier two segments. However, there is an interesting twist here: The lost sheep and lost coin did not repent so much by seeking as by being found. The sheep did not seek out the shepherd! The coin did not seek out the woman! But the son did seek out his father. Or did he? The first two sections show us that, in some sense, *repentance is more about God finding you than you finding him*. This is important because commentators debate whether or not the decision of the younger son to journey home in 15:17ff is driven by selfish motives, or by genuine repentance, or by a mixture of motives, some pure, some impure. But in

a sense, we don't have to decide. The son's repentance reaches its climax not when he finds his father, but when his father finds him. This is a profound and subversive way of indicating that even our repentance is a gift of God's grace. Do we repent because God has already shown us favor? Or do we repent in order to enter his favor? The threefold parable shows us both are true.

Second, the traditional name "parable of the prodigal son" calls attention to only one element of the story, and not even the main on at that. If anything, the parable focuses less on the return of the prodigal than it does on the self-righteous stubbornness of the older son who never left home. But even more than that, the *real* emphasis of this section of the story is on the humble, sacrificial, sinner-seeking love of the father. The father acts in radically counter-cultural ways, seeking out each of his sons in turn.

This is obvious from the progression of the three mini-stories. In the first story, the shepherd loses 1 out of 100 sheep. In the second, the woman loses 1 out of 10 coins. But in the climatic episode, the father loses 2 out of 2 sons, and has to seek both of them out. The emphasis that overshadows everything else is ultimately the initiating, pursuing love of the Father.

This passage as a whole is deeply revolutionary. It is radically subversive. Obviously, one thing Jesus is doing is subverting the self-understanding of the Pharisees and scribes who, at the beginning of the chapter, are grumbling about Jesus' choice of dining companions. The fact that the parable ends with a son grumbling about his father's table guests makes the point all too clear. *Jesus is telling a story about the story Luke is telling.* Specifically, he is telling a story about the Pharisees. The beginning of Luke 15 matches its ending; the Pharisaic complaints have been answered, and their elder brotherishness exposed.

But the story does more than subvert the Pharisees' religious self-understanding; it challenges their entire understanding of redemptive history. They saw themselves as the "true Israel," the people who would be the fullest recipients of the promises when they came to fulfillment. But Jesus is standing that expectation on its head. The prophets had said that when the kingdom finally arrived, God would spread a lavish banquet for his people (e.g., Isa. 25). Jesus, by telling a story that ends with a son who has *returned from exile for a feast* is, in effect, indicating that those who attend his messianic meals are the renewed Israel. Jesus is presenting the Pharisees with a new way of being Israel; if they do not join in, they remain in exile and under the curse. Jesus is saying, "These

meals with sinners celebrate the return of prodigals/exiles from a far country. These meals are the new Passover, celebrating the new exodus."

The younger brother's exile to a far country is a key clue to what the story is all about. After all, exile and return sums up the whole history of Israel. Likewise, the father's declaration that his son was dead but has now been made alive points to a broader theme and hooks into a larger pattern of prophecies about Israel's future. The prophets saw Israel's exile as a death and the nation's return as a resurrection (e.g., Ezek. 36-37; Hosea 6).

Ultimately, then, the parable becomes a retelling of Israel's captivity and exodus. It is a retelling of Israel's history, showing that that long-running narrative is coming to a climax in the ministry of Jesus. Remember, the nation was exiled from the promised land into Egypt during the days of Joseph. Later, they came out in the exodus under the leadership of Moses. Afterwards, they were exiled again into Assyria and Babylon, due to their sin (prodigalness). Under Ezra, Nehemiah, and others, they returned to the land to rebuild the city and temple. However, many Jews believed that the exile really hadn't ended because the prophesies of the new exodus were not coming to complete realization. In Jesus' retelling of Israel's story, "sinners" who eat with Jesus are cast in the role of returning exiles, while the scribes and Pharisees are like Pharaoh (or Tobias and Sanballat) in opposing the new work of liberation and restoration. Jesus is building the new temple out of these materials (the sinners who came to him) but the Pharisees are trying to stop the work and keep these people in slavery. Jesus is celebrating Passover-type meals because the new exodus is underway.

The other parables in Lk. 15 reinforce this theme: It is interesting that in the first two, the sheep and the coin do not bear any obvious blame for being lost. Instead, the shepherd and woman are to blame. Part of God's flock has wandered off; a piece of God's treasure has been misplaced. Thus the shepherd/woman bears the burden of seeking out that which has been lost. Now, in actual history, Israel's exile in Babylon was due to her sin. But because God had promised the nation's restoration, *he must bear the burden of bringing the lost back home.* That's what these parables depict.

There is likely another level to at least the first of the mini-parables. The Pharisees were supposed to be religious leaders in Israel – which means they were to be shepherds. They should have been seeking out the lost sheep of Israel, rather than hindering their return. Jesus riffs off this same shepherd theme in

John 10. Jesus himself comes as the Good Shepherd being and doing what the Pharisees should have been and done (cf. Ps. 23; Ezek. 34; etc.).

All in all, Jesus' three-fold parable lays down the gauntlet with the Pharisees. No wonder they got mad enough to frame him and crucify him! They went from grumbling to murder.

The best treatment of Luke 15:11-32 from the standpoint of redemptive history is undoubtedly found in the work of N. T. Wright. Wright has addressed this text in numerous places, but perhaps the best are his monumental *Jesus and the Victory of God* and (at a more popular level) *Luke for Everyone*. I cannot recommend Wright's work on the gospels highly enough, and this exegesis of this passage is one major reason why. This story shows us what Jesus is up to in his kingdom proclamation and his meals with (implicitly repentant) sinners. Jesus understands his mission as accomplishing the new exodus the prophets promised. Those who gather with him and follow him are spearheading the real return from exile that God had promised long ago.

Wright's main point is that any story that deals with exile and return in the first century Jewish context has to be understood as a broad scale retelling of Israel's history. The same is true of death and resurrection themes (cf. Lk. 15:24, 32 and Ezek. 36-37). (There is some dispute as to whether or not first century Jews saw themselves as in a continuing state of exile/curse/death. There is certainly some evidence that is the case, e.g., Ezra 9, Neh. 9, possibly Dan. 9, etc. On the hand, there is also some counter evidence, e.g., Jn. 8, Mt. 3, etc. Most likely, some Jews believed they still in exile, even if they had returned to the land, while others believed their presence in the land clearly proved the exile was over [at least for them], even if there were many prophecies still to be fulfilled. In a sense, it does not matter. What mattered is that first century Jews accept Jesus' assessment of their problem, his solution, and his new way of being the covenant nation.)

Wright says Jesus is aiming to "blow apart the normal first-century reading of Jewish history and replace it with a different one." Obviously, this is part of Jesus' larger, overarching project of calling the people to a new way of being Israel. The return of the prodigal represents the climatic moment in Israel's history, coming back "home" to the father.

Wright says Jesus is retelling Israel's story in a "sharp and provocative" manner:

> The exodus itself is the ultimate backdrop: Israel goes off into a pagan country, becomes a slave, then is brought back to her own land. But exile and restoration is the main theme. This is what the parable is about.

The parables of Jesus are played out on the screen of this historical situation. The story of the "prodigal son," then, is not so much about individual conversion narratives, although we can certainly find our own stories reflected in the parable. Rather, the story shows that in the career of Jesus, God is acting to rescue the nation of Israel – but he is doing so in such a way that Israel as a whole is being redefined around loyalty to Jesus.

In various places, Wright also goes to great lengths to show that the return from exile is coordinate with the forgiveness of sins (e.g., *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 264ff). To share in this new epoch, one must admit that he is in exile. Or, to put it another way, one must admit that he needs forgiveness. This is one of the problems the Pharisees and other leaders had with Jesus: they could not agree with his diagnosis of their problem.

Of course, this brings us to the fascinating twist in Jesus' story: *Both* sons are really exiled from the father, but it is the openly sinful son, rather than the "righteous" son who is actually participating in the return from exile. Those who think they have no need of a new exodus are actually the most exiled; those who have never left home are actually furthest from the father. The Pharisees may not be exiled from the life of the covenant community, but they are exiled from the Father's heart. Because of their pride and blindness they are missing out on promises that are being fulfilled right before their very eyes. Jesus is bringing Israel back from exile; he is offering the people a share in resurrection life. This is why it is good and right to celebrate!! But the Pharisees won't have any of it. Instead of feasting with Jesus and friends, they grumble about the manna from heaven.

(For some good interaction with Wright's view, see ch. 15 in Ken Bailey's *Joseph and the Prodigal*.)

The point of Jesus's parables is to explain why he's partying with sinners. The answer is clear: There's a party going on in heaven! Every Jew knew that heaven set the model/pattern for earth, so those who are not joining in Jesus' parties are

out of tune with the deepest reality (Cf. the Lord's Prayer). Jesus' actions are the earthly copy of what's happening in the heavenly realm. (See Wright's *Luke for Everyone*, 184f.)

Wright shows the story "inside" the story of the prodigal son parable is the story of Israel's exile and return. (Yes, the parable is bigger on the inside than the outside.) The fact that the older son does not come join the party at the end of the parable leaves us hanging. We're on the edge of our seats: Will he be reunited to his father and brother or will he remain in self-righteous isolation? But of course the real point of the unfinished ending is to challenge *us*. How are we like the older brother? Do we celebrate God's love to other sinners? Or do we get envious and frustrated when God seems to be extra generous to others?

The younger brother's implicit death wish for his father can be understood in another way. "Dad I wish you were dead" also means "Dad I wish I could have your place." This is another way of understanding sin. It's not just wishing we could ditch God and go off to a far country on our own out of his reach; it's also wishing we could have God's place, God's position, God's throne. Every sin is a wish to "be as God, knowing [determining] good and evil" for ourselves. John Stott said it well: Sin is man substituting himself for God, even as salvation is God substituting himself for man.

Or to put it another way, sin is not just trying to be the opposite of God. It is also trying to be God, putting ourselves in God's place. "I am my own god; therefore I can do what I want" is the theology of the prodigal son when he leaves home.

In the sermon, I explained how we have to see ourselves in the two brothers (granting that some of us will lean more towards one brother than the other, but that both tendencies are present in all of us), and we have to see Jesus (and his heavenly Father) in the father. But there's also a sense in which we have to see Jesus' work reflected in the roles of each brother. Jesus shows us true sonship and brotherhood.

Thus, Jesus is our true older brother. He does what the older brother should have done. There are a lot of stories about brothers (specifically, two brothers) in the Scriptures. Obviously, Cain and Abel is paradigmatic. When God came to Cain

asking about his brother, Cain evaded responsibility by asking, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Obviously the correct answer is, "Yes, you are your brother's keeper." So what should the older brother in the parable have done? He should have gone out searching for his brother himself! He should have told his father, "Dad, I'm going after him. Whatever it takes, I'll find him. And if he's wasted the family's money, or incurred debts he can't pay, I'll take care of it at my own expense." (In Ed Clowney's famous sermon, "Sharing the Father's Welcome," this is illustrated by telling the story of a man who went searching for his brother who was "MIA" in Vietnam. He was so respected by both sides in his quest, he was left free to search and became known simply as "The Brother." The sermon is available here: http://www.crossway.org/blog/wp-content/uploads/2008/10/preaching-christ4452xch3.pdf.) Further, once the banquet got underway, the older brother should have joined his father in hosting the feast. He should have been willing to bear the cost of restoring his brother, and he should have extended his brother free forgiveness. Obviously, in Jesus we have a True Elder Brother who does these things for us.

Keller, following Clowney, summarizes:

> We need one who does not just go to the next country to find us but who will come all the way from heaven to earth. We need one who is willing to pay not just a finite amount of money, but, at an infinite cost, bring us into God's family, for our debt is much greater. Either as younger brothers or elder brothers we have rebelled against the father. We deserve alienation, isolation, and rejection. The point of the parable is that forgiveness always involves a price–someone has to pay…Our true elder brother took and paid our debt, on the cross, in our place….There Jesus was stripped naked of his robe and dignity, so that we could be cloted with a dignity and standing we don't deserve. One the cross Jesus was treated as an outcast so that we could be brought into God's family freely by grace. There Jesus drank the cup of eternal justice so that we might have the cup of the father's joy. There was no other way for the heavenly father to bring us in, except at the expense of our true elder brother.

But Jesus also acts as the true younger brother. The younger brother leaves his father's home and goes to a distant country. Oftentimes, younger sons left home and set out to make their fortune in the world with their father's blessing. It was a necessity since the older brother got the main share of the land. But here, the journey of the younger brother to a far country can serve as a metaphor for the incarnation: Jesus left the Father's home in heaven and journeyed to the "far

country" of earth. But we can stretch the metaphor even further: Whereas the younger son in the parable spent all his inherited wealth on selfish pursuits, Jesus used his riches to enrich others – specifically, us (2 Cor. 8-9). This ultimately points us to the cross: He gave everything up in order to give everything to those who possessed nothing!

When we see Jesus as true older brother and as true younger brother, we see how this narrative is simply dripping with gospel grace. The story does not make *explicit* mention of the incarnation and the cross. Muslims have used this to try to build a doctrine in which god forgives us apart from those realities. But in truth, they are implicit in this story. The father pays a huge price to get his sons back, and to reconcile them to one another; had the brother's done what they should have, they would have modeled sacrificial love as well. (And this single parable is not intended to give a complete doctrine of redemption anyway; it's merely Jesus' answer to the complaints of the Pharisees about his table practices.)

We saw how there are two ways to get it wrong, represented by the two brothers. This is important because some Christian groups only focus on one or the other way to get off the path. In Reformed circles, older brother legalism is the standard target. In other Christian subcultures, younger brother lawlessness is considered the main threat to the gospel. We have to remember we are always being attacked on *both* fronts.

These two ways to turn away from God also represent two ways to destroy true community. Sometimes we think lawlessness is the only way to destroy relationships. That it can do so is obvious. But legalism is just as much of a threat. The older brother no longer has a brother in his own eyes ("this son of yours"). Through a mixture of self-righteousness and self-pity, he comes to see himself as unwanted and unloved, cut off from everyone else in the community. His isolation (apart from the gracious, pleading father) outside the party is a perfect picture of where a life of pride, snobbishness, and self-righteousness leads. Such a person cannot love others and cannot accept love. Instead, if anything, he sees himself as competing with others for affection and attention – but as soon as they are offered, they are refused. Thus, we see, both brothers undermine the life and unity of the family. Both kinds of lifestyles vitiate church relationships.

If the two brothers show us how to get it wrong, how do we get it right? We must be like Jesus – and like the father in the story. But how do we grow in fatherlikeness (=Jesuslikeness)?

All too often, churches have failed to share in the welcoming love of the father. Our calling, our mission, in the world is to seek out the lost and bring them home. We are to reflect and extend the father's free forgiving grace and radical welcoming love into the world. But to do this, we must first experience this love ourselves. Otherwise, being told this is our mission becomes one more burdensome duty the slave-master imposes on us.

Do you see God the way Jesus presents the father in the parable? Do you see God as a God who hugs and kisses prodigals before they even get all the way home? A God who runs to us even when we are staggering and limping? Do we see him as a God who bears the cost and shame of our sins, who absorbs all our past wrongs, in order to forgive us so that we can make a fresh start and a new beginning? Do we see him as a God who suffers and pays our debts to restore us to the fellowship of the family table? Do we see him as a God who parties with angels when even one sinner repents and turns towards home?

When we start to see God in these ways, we can start to share in the mission. If God and the angels high five one another and dance and sing every time a sinner repents, we can get just as excited. And that excitement over the grace and love of the gospel can become contagious. In fact, that kind of reckless joy in our hearts is a prerequisite to showing the wild love of God in mission.

God wants to create a new kind of community, a new family, an alternative society, formed by his sacrificial love and his astounding grace. But to be a part of that project, we have to know and rejoice in his love. We can't bring others home to our Father if we're living like slaves in his house. The greatest driving force behind mission, mercy, and evangelism is a deep and robust and joyous experience of God's love in our own hearts.

The problem is that this love confounds us. It seems dangerous to us. We're scared of what might happen if we really talk too openly and freely of this kind of love. This kind of love seems crazy. *What kind of father would welcome a prodigal this way?* What kind of father would act like the dad in the parable? This father is nuts! This father is crazy! (That's why I call this "the parable of the crazy father"!) There is something wild, reckless and even scandalous about the father's love and forgiveness. We have a hard time believing God could really be like this –

with ourselves, or with others. We want to check the fine print. Surely this is too good to be true. Surely there's a catch.

But Jesus told this story precisely so that we would know that God really is like this. There are no hidden catches, no invisible strings attached. This is who God is. This is how he loves. This is how he forgives. This is how he seeks and pursues. This God is so crazy, he not only races after us, he dies for us! It's a crazy thing called the gospel.

This is the very love we are now to show the world. Jesus made becoming like the Father a regular part of his teaching, e.g., "Be compassionate as your Father in heaven is compassionate" (Mt. 5, Lk. 6). This is our model. Returning to the father's house brings with it the challenge to grow in fatherlikeness. If Jesus forgave and ate with sinners, we must do the same. We dare not have higher standards for fellowship than God himself! Yes, sinner track all kinds of problems into the church – but those are precisely the problems we're called to deal with, even as Jesus did.

Question: *Younger brother types enjoyed being around Jesus, but why do they avoid the church today?* Could it be that we have too much elder brotherishness in our churches? Where are the tax collectors and sinners of our culture today? Why aren't they breaking down our doors to get in here and hear the good news and eat and drink at Jesus' table? Why do churches today have the opposite effect on sinners that Jesus had?

We pray for the salvation of the lost, but are we really ready to deal with them if God brings them in? What if the prodigals started to enter our doors? Could we handle it with love and grace? What do we do when God seems to bring all the wrong people into the church? Do we quickly get fed up with all their problems or do we have the grace and patience to work towards solutions with them, even at great cost to ourselves? Do we stay humble or do we get paternalistic and condescending?

Again, we must see ourselves as prodigals who have been carried home. Only then can we love those who are still in a far country. Only then can we seek out and find others as we have been sought and found. Only if we remember how the father welcomed us can we welcome others with the same radical, scandalous love.

Here's the problem: *We have led a lot of people to believe that being a Christian means being a elder brother type; being a Christian means being a self-righteous, finger-wagging, moralistic prig.* Prodigals think we hate them (the way the prodigal in the story believed his older brother hated him). In too many Christian communities there is an insufferable arrogance, a moralistic self-righteousness, a palpable snobbishness. The very word "religion" (a good word in itself!) has become synonymous with suffocating moralism. When people think "evangelical Christian," they picture someone who looks a lot like the older brother standing outside the festivities sneering at "sinners."

This is especially true in the American South, a.k.a., the Bible Belt. We live amongst a people who have been burned by older brother legalisms. We have to show them the true way to be a follower of Jesus. We have to show them the kind of love the father shows in this story.

Tim Keller describes our problem this way:

> It is typical for people who have turned their backs on religion to believe that Christianity is no different. They have been in churches brimming with elder-brother types. They say, 'Christianity is just another religion' But Jesus say, no, that is not true. Everybody knows that the Christian gospel calls us away from the licentiousness of younger brotherness, but few realize that it also differs from moralistic elder brotherness. further…
> The elder brother's problem is his self-righteousness, the way he uses his moral record to put God and others in his debt to control them and get them to do what he wants. His spiritual problem is the radical insecurity that comes from basing his self-image on achievements and performance, so he must endlessly prop up his sense of righteousness by putting others down and finding fault. As one of my teachers in seminary put it, the main barrier between Pharisees and God is 'not their sins, but their damnable good works.'

We need to ponder these things. Non-Christians really think we hate them….and sadly, there is a lot of evidence that evangelical Christians do. We've got to overturn that evidence by finding radical ways to love and serve the prodigal world we live in. Only sacrificial love can bridge the gap between the church and the prodigal culture that surrounds us.

The Father wants to create a community that includes both kinds of sons at the same table, living as brothers. *My burden as pastor at TPC – and I hope it's your burden if you're a member here – is to create a ethos, a "feel," in our church where prodigal sons and daughters can come find the welcome of God and be brought all the way home.* We need to let them know there's room at the table for them too.

That's the kind of compassion that must drive our ministry. That's what happens when we align our hearts with the heart of God. How dare we insist on running in tighter circles than Jesus did? Jesus was friend of sinners – and that's why he has befriended us. But if we know that friendship, we must befriend sinners as well. We must join the party Jesus is throwing for the returning prodigals.

The Greek word for "elder," describing the elder son, is "presbyteros." Yes, that means he is the Presbyterian brother. That's a bit ironic, don't you think? We don't know the denominational affiliation of the younger son, but the older son was definitely Presbyterian! ☺

Obviously I'm half-joking. But we should recognize the sad fact that Presbyterian and Reformed churches are known for repelling the kinds of sinners Jesus attracted. Our churches are known for having more than their fair share of elder brotherishness. We should ask why this is the case, and we should evaluate whether or not we have too much of an elder brother ethos in our communities. Are our churches places where people feel like that if they confessed sin, they would be forgiven? Or would they feel like they had to pay for it? (This is ironic since the Reformation was largely built around doing away with te shaming system of penance!) Are our churches communities where grace is freely proclaimed and lived? Or do people constantly feel like they have to measure up – and if they don't, they had better put up a façade to keep others fooled?

We need to remember that elder brother legalism always, always, always provokes younger brother lawlessness. Maybe the younger brother wanted to get away from home for a reason that had nothing to do with his father….

The father tells the older son, "You are always with me and all that I have is yours." There could be no more pure declaration of the blessings of the covenant and the gospel than these words. God gave everything to his people, he shared

all his gifts with Israel. And yet still Pharisees and other religious leaders were not satisfied. Their self-righteous hearts demanded more.

What we find is that while it might look like the father took his older son for granted, actually it was the other way around: the older son was taking his father (and his father's blessings) for granted. It is very easy to see in this a metaphor of Israel's leadership.

The younger son incurs all kinds of debts. He not only takes money that is not yet rightfully his, which he then proceeds to waste; he also damages the father's public reputation by bringing shame and humiliation upon him. Even when he begins to turn towards home, the son still foolishly thinks in terms of economics, not relationships. When he comes back home, he foolishly hopes to pay back his debt as a slave. But there's really nothing he can do to undo his wrong. The father will simply have to bear it, suffering deep injustice in order to grant forgiveness. There is no forgiveness without suffering. This is the father's immense, extravagant grace.

Interestingly, repentance plays a major theme in Luke 15, just as it does throughout Luke's gospel (cf. Lk. 3, Lk. 13, etc.). The free grace of the father does not make repentance superfluous, but it does help us understand how repentance relates to salvation as a whole.

On the one hand, repentance does not earn or leverage the father's favor. The repentance of the younger son while he is still off in a far country is, at best, very partial. For all the father knew at that point, the son could be coming back to ask for still more money! Even the speech he rehearsed in his head, however sincere, has some flaws, in that he is not totally trusting in the father's love.

On the other hand, repentance is absolutely necessary if we are to enter the father's house. The father came racing out to his son, but his son had also turned back to him. When Jesus says, "Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand," it's as though Jesus is saying, "I cannot give you what I have to offer unless you repent – unless you get in line behind me and follow me." Repentance is the pathway into the father's blessing; it's the road that leads us home; it's our ticket to the feast.

This story is obviously one of the most famous and most beloved in all of Scripture. It has inspired many glorious pieces of art and music. My favorite painting of the passage is Rembrandt's *Return of the Prodigal.* Rembrandt's work inspired an excellent meditation on the story by Henri Nouwen, entitled *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming.* I highly recommend Nouwen's book. (More on that below.) My favorite song inspired by this text is (largely for sentimental reasons) Rich Mullin's "Growing Young."

There are a lot of good books on this passage.

I already referred to Nouwen's work. This book is very good on a number of fronts. It is a fine exposition of the grace of God revealed in this story. Nouwen shows that we must *accept* being found (which is sometimes as hard as accepting the fact that we have been lost). He hits on themes such as assurance, restoration of community, and growth in mission as we become more and more like the father. Exegesis and application are woven together with art criticism, as Nouwen analyzes in mesmerizing detail Rembrandt's famous painting of the younger son's homecoming. Nouwen also works his personal journey into the book in a very touching way. Highly recommended.

Tim Keller's new book *The Prodigal God* has an ironic, subversive title, which suits the contents well. Keller credits Clowney for inspiring his interpretation of the parable, and Keller does an excellent job exegeting and applying the parable from a number of angles.

Ken Bailey's *Poet and Peasant* and *Through Peasant Eyes* are classic works that address this passage (among other things) in its first century context. Bailey gives a very deep reading of the parable based on its historical-cultural setting. See also his *Finding the Lost* for an even more detailed cultural interpretation of the chapter.

More accessible is Bailey's fabulous *The Cross and the Prodigal*. More problematic is his intertextual study *Jacob and the Prodgical.* I say "problematic" because I think Bailey largely gets the story of Jacob and Esau wrong (see Peter Leithart's take: http://www.leithart.com/2004/01/12/bailey-on-jacob-and-rebekah/; http://www.leithart.com/archives/000408.php). Nevertheless, the book has a lot of good insights and connects the prodigal son story to a lot of OT passages in a helpful way.

There are a number of commentaries on Luke that give a very good treatment of Luke 15. In fact, there is a broad consensus on the meaning and application of the parable, it seems to me. In preparation, I read numerous commentaries and listened to even more sermons, and I found that most everyone was saying the same thing about this passage. I take that as a very healthy sign.

I've already commended Wright's work on the prodigal son, but will mention it here. Wright's understanding of the parable is fresh, yet it integrates nicely into his understanding of the gospels. I highly recommend any student of the NT take Wright's work seriously; his work on this particular text is widely recognized as some of his best.

Our elder brother tendencies really come out when we involve ourselves deeply in the community and ministry of the church. For many of us, the old saying holds true, "I love the church; it's Christians I can't stand!" The people Jesus has drawn to himself are often difficult to work with. They disappoint us. They hurt us. They sin against us. They drag all kinds of problems and baggage into the church for the "more mature" (e.g., leadership) to deal with. They create work for us – mercy work, counseling work, etc. It's easy to love Jesus; loving his friends can be much, much more difficult.

The poet Shelley once said, "I could believe in Jesus if only he did not drag behind him his leprous bride, the church." When the young brothers come into the church, do we embrace them or shun them? Help them or ignore them? Serve them or roll our eyes at them? Ministry would be easy if the church had an admissions department, if we could weed out the less intelligent, less polished, less affluent, the way Ivy league colleges do. But we have to deal with anyone and everyone Jesus drags into our midst. As William Willimon has said, sometimes the greatest challenge of the Christian life is putting up with Jesus' body, the church. How do we deal with the gap between the ideal we find described in the Bible and what we see around us each Lord's day? Are we willing to love enough to fill that gap?

It's really Christians who are more mature, who have been in the church longer, who know the Bible and have their lives in order, who are most prone to elder brotherishness. We're susceptible because we haven't made younger brother mistakes so it's easy to look down on them. I would say pastors and other church

officers are especially given to the sins of the elder brother. They're the ones who often have to carry the burdens of the younger brothers Jesus brings in.

But are we older brother types really all that different from God's perspective? Sin is sin after all, and even the smallest sin is worthy of eternal condemnation. Older brothers who have never left home have no more claim on God than younger brothers just wandering in from their prodigal escapades. We are all utterly dependent on God's grace for forgiveness and restoration. To pretend as though we were categorically different is to fool ourselves. We have to be able to identify with them as fellow-sinners.

Luke's gospel reveals an important pattern: Those who justify themselves (like the older brother) also end up despising others (namely, those they see as younger brothers/spiritual inferiors). See the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican in Luke 18, especially Luke's interpretive comment in Lk. 18:9. The Pharisees provide continual proof that self-righteousness destroys community; those who trust in their own righteousness find it all too easy to justify hatred of others.

So, again, what do we do when younger brothers wander in the church? We are increasingly living in a culture full of younger brothers. Yet conservative, evangelical churches seem full to the brim with straight-laced older brother types. What are we to do to reach the younger brothers in the world around us? It is especially incumbent on church pastors and other officers to create an ethos of mercy in the church so that younger brother types can find a warm reception when they repent and come home.

It may seem that younger brother types really need older brothers to help them out of their problems. And no doubt that's true. Younger brothers often need Bible teaching, accountability, monetary help to get back on their feet, job skill training, intensive counseling, etc. But older brothers need younger brothers just as much. A church of morally upright older brothers needs to go find some younger brothers and bring them in if they aren't already coming. Older brothers need younger brothers around to remind them that salvation is always and only by grace.

This parable in Luke 16 shows what church life should look like: It should like an ongoing party for repentant sinners. What are we doing to make that happen?

Related to the above, Will Willimon describes ministry this way:

> We can't love Jesus without loving his body. It is a crucified body, to be sure, in bad shape, statistically speaking, but a body all the more in need of a loving caress.
> We are those called, at this time in the history of Christendom, to worry about what constitutes a church, to be a sign of the visible unity of the church, to keep encouraging members of the body to honor one another, and sometimes even to promise a dead, decadent body nothing less than resurrection. An embodied, incarnate Christ sanctifies our mundane ecclesiastical body work as his. The church is Christ's way of taking up room in his still being redeemed world.
> The night I was ordained, a bishop laid hands on my head, repeating the ancient words of the Ordinal, "Never forget that the ones to whom you are called to minister are the ones for whom he died." There I was, wondering, "Will the church appreciate my superior training? Will I get an all-electric parsonage?"
> And there was the church, once again forcing me to be a Chalcedonian Christian, once again forcing me to believe in the blessed Incarnation, once again telling me, "The often disheartening, sometimes disappointing ones I'm making you fortunate enough to serve, are the ones for whom I died. This is my idea of salvation. Don't mess it up." Oh the challenge of believing the Incarnation!

Some quotations:

Why is he so angry with the father? He feels he has the right to tell the father how the robes, rings, and livestock of the family should be deployed. In the same way, religious people commonly live very moral lives, but their goal is to get leverage over God, to control him, to put him in a position where they think he owes them. Therefore, despite all their ethical fastidiousness and piety, they are actually rebelling against his authority. If, like the elder brother, you believe that God ought to bless you and help you because you have worked so hard to obey him and be a good person, then Jesus may be your helper, your example, even your inspiration, but he is not your Savior. You are serving as your own Savior.

-- Tim Keller, *The Prodigal God*

"Then he shall get up, come to his father and confess to him, 'I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me like one of your hired servants.'" When he confesses like that, he will be considered worthy of more than that for which he prayed. His father neither takes him in like a hired servant nor treats him like a stranger. Oh no, he kisses him a a son. He accepts him as a dead man come back to life again. He counts him worthy of the divine feast and gives him the precious garment he once wore. Now there is singing and joy in the father's home. What happened is the result of the Father's grace and loving kindness. Not only does he bring his son back from death, but also through the Spirit he clearly shows his grace. To replace corruption, he clothes him with an incorruptible robe. To satisfy hunger, he kills the fatted calf. The Father provides shoes for his feet so that he will not travel far away again. Most wonderful of all, he puts a divine signet ring upon his hand. By all these things, he begets him anew in the image of the glory of Christ.

– St. Athanasius, *Festal Letter VII*

On the third Sunday of preparation for Lent, we hear the parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk. 15-11-32). Together with the hymns of this day, the parable reveals to us the time of repentance as man's return from exile. The prodigal son, we are told, went to a far country and there spent all that he had. A far country! It is this unique definition of our human condition that we must assume and make ours as we begin our approach to God. A man who has never felt that he is exiled from God and from real life will never understand what Christianity is about. And the one who is perfectly "at home" in this world and its life, who has never been wounded by the nostalgic desire for another Reality, will not understand what repentance is. …

It is easy to confess that I have not fasted on prescribed days, or that I've missed my prayers, or become angry. It is quite a different thing, however, to realize suddenly that I have defiled and lost my spiritual beauty, that I am far away from my real home, my real life, and that something precious and pure and beautiful has been hopelessly broken in the very texture of my existence. Yet this, and only this, is repentance, and therefore it is also a deep desire to return, to go back, to recover that lost home. I received from God wonderful riches … I received the knowledge of God and in Him the knowledge of everything else and the power to be a son of God. And all this I have lost, all this I am losing all the time, not only in particular sins and transgressions, but in the sin of all sins: the deviation of my love from God, preferring the "far country" to the beautiful home of the Father.

– Fr. Alexander Schmemann, *Great Lent*

The prodigal son, having claimed his own share of the inheritance, lost everything in this world and was deprived of all the joys of life: he lost his fatherland, his family's support; he did not have a piece of bread left and was entirely alone: all the roads of this world were closed to him. 'Tribulation and anguish, upon every soul of man that doeth evil' (Rom. ii. 9). And it is at this very point that the divine miracle is performed — in the very confinement there is liberation; in the very grief, salvation.

Among us too there are people who have reached the limits of grief. it seems to them that destruction is all around them — let them be comforted. When man reaches this point when all roads are closed to him horizontally, then the road upwards opens before him. If compressed on all sides, water rises; so the soul, compressed, imprisoned, walled in by grief, rises to heaven.

We are fortunate if we detach ourselves inwardly, in time and on our own initiative, from the broad way of worldliness, if neither the comforts of life, nor riches, nor success, fill our hearts and lead us away from that which is essential.

-- Fr. Alexander Elchaninov, *The Diary of a Russian Priest*

For most of my life I have struggled to find God, to know God, to love God. I have tried hard to follow the guidelines of the spiritual life—pray always, work for others, read the Scriptures—and to avoid the many temptations to dissipate myself. I have failed many times but always tried again, even when I was close to despair.

Now I wonder whether I have sufficiently realized that during all this time God has been trying to find me, to know me, and to love me. The question is not "How am I to find God?" but "How am I to let myself be found by him?" The question is not "How am I to know God?" but "How am I to let myself be known by God?" And, finally, the question is not "How am I to love God?" but "How am I to let myself be loved by God?" God is looking into the distance for me, trying to find me, and longing to bring me home.

-- Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*

(I wish I could give a lot more quotes from Nouwen and Keller…but you'll just have to read them for yourself!)