

CHAPTER THREE

THE PARABLE OF THE
TWO SONS: A REVELATION
ABOUT GOD

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That Jesus revealed in part the nature of God the Father is evident throughout the four Gospels. Beginning with the experience in the temple at twelve years of age when He said, “Wist ye not that I must be about my Father’s business?” (Luke 2:49) to His final statements on the cross, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. . . . Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit” (Luke 23:34, 46), Jesus continually talked about, taught about, and revealed God to His hearers.

In the early part of His ministry, Jesus pointed out His relationship with His Father and some of God’s characteristics and attributes.¹ Through personal experience, His followers learned about God. On the Mount of Transfiguration, Peter, James, and John “were eyewitnesses of his majesty”; they “received from God the Father honour and glory”; they heard “a voice . . . from the excellent glory”; and they had “also a more sure word of prophecy” (2 Peter 1:16–19). The great Intercessory Prayer revealed the importance of knowing the Father and the Son, as well as Their oneness, teaching and commanding us to become one with Them (see John 17:3–26).

It is in the parables that Jesus taught, particularly those He taught in the latter part of His ministry, that I have found insights into the character of God.² The parable more commonly known as “The Prodigal Son” is unique

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because of what can be learned about God the Father (see Luke 15:11–32). I prefer to call this parable “The Parable of the Two Sons: A Revelation about God.”

Before studying this parable, the thought expressed by the Prophet Joseph Smith about understanding parables is essential: “I have a key by which I understand the scriptures [or parables]. I enquire, what was the question which drew out the answer, or caused Jesus to utter the parable?”³

The parable of the father and his two sons is given somewhere near the end of the northern Galilean ministry, shortly after the Transfiguration. The specific setting focuses on four groups: publicans and sinners, who came to hear Him, and Pharisees and scribes, who came to trap Him.⁴ Their complaint was that “this man [Jesus] receiveth sinners, and eateth with them” (Luke 15:2). Why is this so? Why does He eat with them? What is our responsibility toward sinners and publicans, or those who are lost? The answer to these questions came in three parables. The first was the parable of the lost sheep—those that through their own choosing become lost because of ignorance and temporal concerns. The second was the parable of the lost coin—an object that was lost because of carelessness or neglect. In these two parables, going after and seeking diligently are the two main activities, joy in heaven being the result of finding the lost. The third parable is the one studied here and is much longer, has different characters, and is written in greater detail than the two shorter parables.⁵

THE YOUNGER SON

“A certain man had two sons” (Luke 15:11). Who is the man referred to here? Many feel that the certain man represents God the Father.⁶ The evidence for this will be seen as we study the parable. “The younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living” (v. 12). Note that Luke said “he divided unto *them*”—both sons. To give both sons their inheritance was in harmony with the law at that time.⁷ “Not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country” (v. 13).

God has given each of us an inheritance—spiritually and temporally. Each of us is on a journey in life. Some are on a journey seeking an eternal companion. Some seek a degree. Others are on a journey seeking a livelihood. Most of us are on several journeys at the same time. With our inheritance in hand, we travel through life, no longer in the actual

presence of God. And God has allowed us “his living” (v. 12) to journey to this “far country” (v. 13).

While on this journey, the younger son “wasted his substance with riotous living” (v. 13), perhaps spending his time with harlots (see v. 30). Some in this life, when away from home—away from father and mother—feel they are free to do what they want since they do not have to report in each night. “And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine [not just an ordinary famine—a mighty one] in that land; and he began to be in want. And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country” (vv. 14–15). It is interesting that when he was in want, he sought to join someone or something. However, because of his circumstances, his choices were limited—choices he would never select if he were still basking in his inheritance. We know that in our day people go through similar experiences.

The citizen of that country “sent him into his fields to feed swine” (v. 15). George A. Buttrick notes, “Jesus’ hearers would consider a swineherd’s occupation the most degrading a Jew could accept. A Talmudic proverb declares: ‘Cursed is the man who tends swine, and the man who teaches his son Greek wisdom!’ He soon came to envy the swine the food doled out to them. He himself was not allowed even such pitiful fare. Pods of the carob tree are . . . fodder for domestic animals, but as food for men only in times of dire need.”⁸

Why did the Savior choose the occupation of feeding the swine to teach His audience? To the Jews, swine were unclean. To fall that low could only illustrate with even greater power the main theme of the parable: can a swineherd—someone who occupies a base, vile, degrading position—be accepted, be forgiven, and be permitted to rejoice “in the presence of the angels of God?” (v. 10).

“And no man gave unto him” (v. 16). No parents, no family members, no friends, not even local welfare offices would offer help. If anyone had helped him at this low point of his experience, the thought expressed in the next phrase probably never would have occurred: “He came to himself.”⁹ What must we face to come to ourselves? For some it has been the death of a loved one, an interview with a priesthood leader, a scripture, a meeting, an inspired talk, an illness (personal or that of someone you know), or some other such experience. Such shock treatments can help us to see ourselves as we really are. To the younger son, his was a spiritual shock treatment.

At this point the young son began to talk to himself, planning ahead carefully, anticipating what to say. “How many hired servants of my father’s have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him” (vv. 17–18):

1. “Father, I have sinned against heaven” (v. 18).
2. “[I have sinned] before thee” (v. 18).
3. “[I] am no more worthy to be called thy son” (v. 19).
4. “Make me as one of thy hired servants” (v. 19).

Have you ever done something wrong, something for which you are ashamed? Where do you want to go? Would you rather be alone? The younger son said he would arise and go to his father. Since he had fallen so far, so low, the only place for him to go was up—to ascend. Not only did he say he would go up, but he would go to his father. To me this is one of the most beautiful sentences in the parable: “I will arise and go to my father” (v. 18). This illustrates the truth President J. Reuben Clark spoke:

Every human being is born with the light of faith kindled in his heart as on an altar, and that light burns and the Lord sees that it burns, during the period before we are accountable. When accountability comes then each of us determines how we shall feed and care for that light. If we shall live righteously that light will glow until it suffuses the whole body, giving to it health and strength and spiritual light as well as bodily health. If we shall live unrighteously that light will dwindle and finally almost flicker out. Yet it is my hope and my belief that the Lord never permits the light of faith wholly to be extinguished in any human heart, however faint the light may glow. The Lord has provided that there shall still be there a spark which, with teaching, with the spirit of righteousness, with love, with tenderness, with example, with living the Gospel, shall brighten and glow again, however darkened the mind may have been.¹⁰

That the son’s faith would grow was only one important truth. Another great truth was that he would go to his father. There is a homewardness in all of us.¹¹ That feeling of homewardness leads us to our earthly homes as well as our heavenly home. Apparently the younger son had learned enough from his father to know that home is a sanctuary, a place of love and acceptance. The desire to return home and the confidence he would be accepted are evidences that support the thesis that the father in the story is God and, as His children, we can arise and go to Him no matter

how far we have fallen. A first step of repentance is to arise and *look up* to Him for help. The Father is both *just* and *merciful*. Knowing the character of the Father inspires a confidence to return. The son did arise, and he did go to his father.

“But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him” (v. 20). I am grateful the writer included the expression “when he was yet a great way off.” It convinces me that with every dawn, a concerned father arose and looked into the distance with the hope his son would return. The father looked with anxiousness when a traveler appeared on the horizon and thought, *Could that be my son?* Do we understand the anxiousness with which our parents and leaders have watched for us? Do we understand why parents lie awake at night and worry whether children will return home pure, chaste, and in one piece? This great father knew his son well enough that when yet a great way off he recognized his son. Perhaps this is another illustration of the character of God. He recognizes the individuality of His children, even while they are yet a great way off.

“A country lad listened in an English cathedral to the reading of this story. Came the words ‘But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran.’ . . . The lad, quite forgetful of place and people, wishing perhaps that he had that kind of home and father, shouted, ‘Eh, but yon was a grand old man!’”¹²

The good father did four things: (1) he had compassion, (2) he ran to his son, (3) he embraced him, and (4) he kissed him (see v. 20). It is interesting to note that the father did not say, “Well, I see you have learned your lesson,” or “I am busy right now; I will see you in a minute,” or “Go on home to your mother, and I will see you after work.” The apparent message is one of acceptance and forgiveness, a continuation of the theme taught in the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. Nothing is said, however, about a restoration of blessings, and in that an important lesson is given to us in our day.

When those who have not attended meetings regularly return to the Church, we too can have compassion and follow the custom of our culture, which is to eagerly greet them (run to them) and extend a hand of fellowship. (In certain world cultures, it is acceptable to embrace them or even to kiss them on the cheek.)

“And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned” (v. 21). This open confession was voluntary, as opposed to an admission of guilt when confronted. It was one that came from a man who “came to himself” (v. 17).

The son voluntarily confessed to have sinned against heaven and to have sinned in his father's sight. I have seen people who recognize that one party has been offended but not that both have been offended. In working with missionaries who had committed moral transgressions in the past, I found that most realized they had broken the Lord's commandments and by so doing had offended heaven; but when asked if they realized they had offended people on earth, many said they had not understood this. If a young man offends a young lady by committing moral transgression, should he not seek her forgiveness, realizing he has sinned against her and heaven? Also, some transgressions are to be confessed "in the sight" of a judge in Israel.

"The father said to his servants" (v. 22):

1. "Bring forth the best robe" (v. 22)—reserved for special guests, a very special honor.
2. "Put a ring on his hand" (v. 22)—suggesting dignity, honor, and a recognition of family acceptance.
3. "Put . . . shoes on his feet" (v. 22)—indicating he was a son, not a slave. A mark of a slave was to go barefooted. The son had fallen to such a lowly state, but now he was restored to family status.
4. "Bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it" (v. 23)—the one reserved for special occasions. "For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry" (v. 24).

We have now come to the end of what some consider to be the first half of this parable. Buttrick says, "The first (vss. 11–24) illustrates the joy with which God welcomes the repentant sinner. It is complete in itself, and teaches much the same truth as the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. The second (vss. 25–32) rebukes the criticism of this interpretation of the love and mercy of God that had been made by 'righteous persons that need no repentance.' . . . The second part is just as parabolic . . . as the first, and the whole is best regarded as a unity."¹³

The attributes of God revealed in this first half of the parable are:

1. He is a God of law who gives an inheritance to His children, allowing them agency to use their inheritance as they choose.
2. He is a God of compassion and mercy, accepting the repentant on conditions of sincere repentance.
3. He is an omniscient God, knowing the thoughts and intents of the repentant, and can therefore judge according to justice and mercy.

THE DUTIFUL SON

Having learned about the younger son, the attention is focused on the older son. “Now his elder son was in the field” (v. 25) performing his duty, apparently faithful in his responsibilities, caring for the inheritance his father had given him. Returning from the field, he heard music and dancing and asked a servant the meaning. The servant said, “Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound. And he was angry, and would not go in” (vv. 27–28). To refuse to go was an insult. The attitude of the elder son was wrong, especially if the elder son understood the laws regarding inheritance.¹⁴

“Therefore came his father out, and intreated him” (v. 28). To entreat is to ask earnestly, to persuade by imploring. The fact that the father left the festivity, which he did not have to do, and entreated his son is evidence to me of the mercy and condescension of God the Father. On other occasions He has entreated His disobedient children to turn to Him: “For notwithstanding I shall lengthen out mine arm unto them from day to day, they will deny me; nevertheless, I will be merciful unto them, saith the Lord God, if they will repent and come unto me; for mine arm is lengthened out all the day long” (2 Nephi 28:32).¹⁵ Considering the many scriptural evidences, it is not out of character for the Father to entreat His son.

The elder son listened but did not understand the message, for he responded with “Lo [implying a reproach or an attempt to put the father in his place], these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment” (v. 29). If the elder son had truly been as faithful as he indicated here, and if he were to maintain the right attitude, and if he were to endure to the end, he would be blessed to return to the presence of God.¹⁶

The elder son continued his expressions of displeasure, even accusing his brother of “devouring thy living” with harlots (v. 30). Whether the younger actually spent his time with harlots or the elder son was accusing him falsely out of jealousy and anger is not known. If the younger son were guilty of such, he must fully repent; and if the elder son were speaking out of anger and jealousy, he must also repent.

The father then reminded his son of three important truths:

1. “Son” (v. 31)—addressing him as son was a reminder of who he was.
2. “Thou art ever with me” (v. 31)—he still had all the blessings and rights of family association, even eternal associations.

3. “All that I have is thine” (v. 31)—all that the Father has to give, the entire inheritance, even eternal life, could be his.

An important message that comes from the second half of the parable (vv. 25–32) is that Jesus taught the audience, the Pharisees and the scribes, that they were like the elder son. They felt they “had it made.” The Savior held out hope for them. If they would be entreated, they could enjoy the blessings of heaven. If they would accept and follow the counsel of the Father, He would say, “All that I have is thine.” If they refused to accept the message, their hypocritical, self-righteous attitude (like that of the elder son) would lead to their destruction.

SUMMARY

The following are the key principles I see in the parable of the father and his two sons. First, a loving Father, following the laws He has ordained, gave inheritances to His children and allowed them agency to do with the inheritances what they chose. Second, God allows His children to experience shock treatment to help them come to themselves and see themselves as they really are. Third, sinners can and should be received by the Father and His faithful Saints. We are to have compassion for them, extend fellowship to them, embrace them, and clothe them with dignity, honor, and respect. Fourth, God, our Heavenly Father, condescends to entreat His children. Fifth, justice will be satisfied and mercy will claim both the repentant and the obedient and the faithful. No amount of repentance could restore to the younger son the actual inheritance he had wasted. He lost something that cannot be regained. If the elder son will repent of his self-righteous attitude, he can enjoy all that the Father has. If he will not repent, he will lose the rights to an eternal inheritance in the kingdom of his Father. Finally, God is all-powerful, all-knowing, compassionate, just, and merciful, and much, much more.

The Savior revealed in this parable these attributes and characteristics so that by knowing the Father and His Son and striving to become like Them, we can be inheritors of eternal life and be crowned with this same godly nature.

NOTES

1. Nine specific points of the Father–Son relationship and God’s nature are outlined by John as follows (see John 5:17–30):
 - a. “My Father worketh . . . and I work” (v. 17).
 - b. “The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do:

- for what things soever he doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise” (v. 19).
- c. “For the Father loveth the Son” and the Son loves the Father (v. 20).
 - d. The Father “sheweth [the Son] all things that himself doeth” (v. 20).
 - e. “The Father raiseth up the dead, and quickeneth them; even so the Son quickeneth whom he will” (v. 21).
 - f. “The Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son” (v. 22).
 - g. “The Father hath life in himself; so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself” (v. 26).
 - h. The Father “hath given him authority to execute judgment also, because he is the Son of man. . . . As I hear, I judge: and my judgment is just” (vv. 27, 30).
 - i. “I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me” (v. 30).
2. Some of these later parables include that of the unmerciful servant, the wicked husbandman, the marriage of the king’s son, the unjust judge, the talents, and the sheep and the goats.
 3. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 276–77.
 4. Jesus may have intended to draw parallels between the four groups mentioned and the sheep, the money, and the sons. For example, the lost sheep and the lost silver could represent the sinner and the publicans, who were lost spiritually. The two sons could represent the Pharisees and scribes, who had been given inheritances and had either wasted them through riotous living (like the younger son) or immersed themselves in their traditional self-righteous shells (like the older son). In this chapter, it is more appropriate to classify all four groups as being lost, regardless of how they became such. None can enter heaven without walking the strait and narrow path, submitting to the ordinances from authorized priesthood holders.
 5. Obviously there are certain guidelines and potential problems when interpreting parables. Some helpful rules are: (a) Do not force a meaning on subordinate incidents. (b) Do not regard as parallel parables that are connected by superficial likeness of imagery. (c) Bear in mind that the same illustration does not always have the same significance—leaven, e.g., signifies a principle of good as well as a principle of evil. (d) Remember that the comparison in a parable is not complete, does not touch at every point. Thus, the characters of the unjust judge or the unjust steward or the nobleman who went into a far country—possibly referring to the infamous Archelaus—do not concern the interpretation of the parable. The parable draws a picture of life as it is, not as it ought to be, and compares certain points in this picture with heavenly doctrine.

- (e) Observe the proper proportions of a parable, and do not make the episode more prominent than the main line of teaching” (Bible Dictionary, “Parables,” 741).
6. See Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965–73), 1:513; J. R. Dummelow, *Commentary on the Holy Bible* (New York: Macmillan, 1936), 758; Department of Seminaries and Institutes of Religion, *Life and Teachings of Jesus and His Apostles* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1979), 124; Joachim Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables* (New York: Scribner, 1966), 101, 103.
 7. “It may seem strange that such a demand should be made, and that the parent should have acceded to it. . . . It has been an immemorial custom in the east for sons to demand and receive their portion of the inheritance during their father’s lifetime; and the parent, however aware of the dissipated inclinations of the child, could not legally refuse to comply with the application” (Adam Clarke, *The New Testament of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1977], 1:457).
 8. George A. Buttrick, ed., *The Interpreter’s Bible*, 12 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1952–57), 8:272–73.
 9. “*The Abingdon Bible Commentary* suggests that the Greek word is a medical term: when he ‘came to his senses after fainting.’ The idiom was in many languages before Jesus used it, but only he could give it heavenly light. Because of him it is in our language, for we say of a neighbor’s black mood, ‘He is not himself today.’ Acts 12:11 says of Peter waking out of sleep: ‘And when Peter was come to himself’” (Buttrick, *Interpreter’s Bible*, 8:274).
 10. J. Reuben Clark Jr., in Conference Report, October 1936, 114.
 11. This homeward feeling is seen elsewhere in scripture. Following the first vision, Joseph Smith “went home” (Joseph Smith–History 1:20). The Nephites were told to “go ye unto your homes, and ponder” (3 Nephi 17:3). The healed blind man was sent home (see Mark 8:22–26).
 12. Buttrick, *Interpreter’s Bible*, 8:270.
 13. Buttrick, *Interpreter’s Bible*, 8:270.
 14. “In every point of view, the anger of the old son was improper and unreasonable. He had already received his part of the inheritance, see ver. 12, and his profligate brother had received no more than what was his just dividend. Besides, what the father had acquired since that division he had a right to dispose of as he pleased, even to give it all to one son; nor did the ancient customs of the Asiatic countries permit the other children to claim any share in such property thus disposed of. The following is an institute of the GENTOO law on this subject: (Code, chap. ii. sect. 9, p. 79) ‘If a father gives, by his own choice, land, houses, orchards, and the earning of his own industry, to one of his sons, the other sons shall not receive any share of it.’ Besides, whatever property the father had

acquired after the above division, the son or sons, as the prodigal in the text, could have no claim at all on, according to another institute in the above Asiatic laws, see chap. ii, sect. ii, p. 85, but the father might divide it among those who remained with him: therefore is it said in the text, 'Son, thou art always with me, and all that I have is thine,' ver. 31" (Clarke, *New Testament of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*, 1:459).

15. See also Isaiah 5:25; 9:12, 17, 21; 10:4. Even though the people mentioned had turned from the Lord, "his hand is stretched out still." The Lord has also entreated and will continue to entreat His children through the voices of prophets, angels, and even the elements (see D&C 43:20–28).
16. "The weeks and months of doing work which his brother had previously done, compensating for his father's inattention, receiving no compliments, and the father's preoccupation settled in on him. Perhaps he thought he should have taken his inheritance also. He would not have wasted it, but increased it. In spite of these thoughts, he had stayed at home and been a dutiful son. There was no music, no dancing for his righteous life; and yet when his younger brother returned, all of these things celebrated his coming.

"Word came to the father that his son was outside and would not come in, 'therefore came his father out, and intreated him' (Luke 15:28). The father must have realized the oversight; he may even have apologized. The great concern for his younger son was off his mind. He remembered he had not been as complimentary to the older son as usual. He recalled the older son's more intense work to compensate—no dancing, no music, no sumptuous feasts. Hearts were too heavy for those things" (Vaughn J. Featherstone, "However Faint the Light May Glow," *Ensign*, November 1982, 72).