

THE GOOD FATHER

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INTRODUCTION

Jesus' most beautiful articulation of the gospel message or the good news as He called it, is found in Luke 15:11-32. Known to many as "The Story of the Prodigal Son" or "The Story of the Lost Son", it could also be titled, "The Story of the Good Father". When Jesus told this story His audience was a crowd of tax collectors, sinners (probably addicts, prostitutes, thieves,

adulterers, a whole lot of people who were all the black sheep of their own families) and grumbling Pharisees (religious people) who were offended by Jesus association with all these sinners. Allow me to use some cultural context and a little poetic license to bring this story alive. Please also read Luke 15:11-32 for the full Biblical account.

BETRAYAL

This story begins with a notorious event that shocks an entire village. The outrageous news spreads beyond the village itself as one of the hot topics of gossip to the borders of the nation. When wives cautioned their husbands; "You don't want to be like that incompetent Father." the husbands knew what they were hinting at. When parents cautioned their children; "You don't want to be like that disgraceful Son." the kids knew what they meant. The scandal was household news. It was commented on at the Synagogue and other public forums where the strongest condemnation possible was expressed at the complete moral failure of both the Father and the Son.

"The scandal was household news."

What was this scandalous news that was spreading from person to person and village to village?

It was the news of a Son's extreme rebellion and a Father's tragic incompetence. It took place within a wealthy family in Israel, when a Son

rebelled against his own Father. In an act that defied the values of their entire nation this Son disowned his Father and his family. The Son insisted that his Father give him his inheritance immediately. He wanted nothing to do with his Father. He just wanted his money. The Son didn't care if his Father lived or died.

In the context of Jewish society and culture, honouring your Father was one of the highest duties of a Son. When Jesus listeners heard that this Son had dared to request his inheritance from his Father they would have perceived him as one of the biggest scumbags on the planet! I can visualise a corporate atmosphere of disgust towards this Son rising tangibly amongst the crowd. Even with all these sinners in the crowd none of them are likely to have ever done something that was so vile in the eyes of their culture.

In any culture this would be one of the highest levels of betrayal and dishonour that a Son could possibly commit against his Father. These Jewish listeners perceived the Son in this story as public enemy number one! In fact they would have already been anticipating the next part of the

story. They would have been anticipating the Son being completely disowned and a punishment of death by stoning. At bare minimum, this Son should be disowned and receive the beating of a lifetime. They would have been anticipating the Father's wrath to be poured out on the Son!

Surely this wicked Son was about to suffer the wrath of his Father!!! If you could possibly cross a line in that culture, which would incur immediate rejection from your family this was it – tell the whole world that your Father means nothing to you and you would prefer that he was dead! All he was good for was his money.

The son had publicly disowned and dishonoured his Father.

The fact that this Father did not explode in a violent rage would have perplexed the crowd. It was a Son's duty to honour his Father and it was a Father's duty to discipline his Son. The Father's failure to punish his Son was almost as much of a moral failure as the Son's rebellion. It would have caused the crowd hearing this story and also the people in the story to perceive the Father as a villain. This tale that Jesus is telling these people is absolutely scandalous. It got under their skin. It was causing an emotional response from the hearers who are anticipating wrath and justice.

This Father's failure to punish his Son caused the crowd to judge him as a morally deficient Father. The fact that this Father does not follow the cultural protocol has automatically set him apart

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as a very unusual Father and a very bad Father. As the story proceeds we now have two villains in the eyes of the crowd of listeners and in the eyes of the people in the story – the rebellious Son and the incompetent Father.

The whole village knew the family. Their culture revolved around community. They were a great example of the saying, “It takes a village to raise a child.” Enforcing justice was a community responsibility. However, before they could gather their stones and rally a mob, the rebellious Son had fled. Not just to another village. The news and the fatal justice would have caught up to him in another village. Not just to another region, the news and the justice would have caught up with him almost anywhere he went in the nation. The Son fled the culture, fled the justice, fled the fear, the guilt and the shame and he kept riding with his bags of money until he reached a distant nation.

There would be no punishment inflicted on the Father except that of ruined reputation. The whole nation passed a judgment on this Father as a bad Father.

LOST

Jesus goes on and tells us that the Son wasted his wealth on wild living. The crowd surrounding Jesus would have been reading into that and

assuming even as the older brother did that he was hiring prostitutes and was without any moral compass. For this crowd the fact that he wasted

the wealth of his inheritance was considered as wicked as sleeping with prostitutes. This young man is crossing every line of decency and they want to see justice – they want to see punishment!

With the escape of the Son and the rumours of his twisted lifestyle, the story gathered momentum and notoriety throughout the entire nation.

Months had gone by. The Father sat in his seat on the porch again. Alone. In the middle of the night. The servants had gone to bed. His eldest Son had gone to bed. But the Father couldn't sleep. There was a bright full moon. The Father could see clearly as he looked toward the horizon and the long dusty road coming from the village. He could see that the road was empty. He slowly drank his hot drink, warming his hands on the mug. His heart overflowed with love for his Son. A silent tear made its way from his heart to his chin.

The Son sat up that night too. The rumours were true. Actually the rumours didn't capture even half of this lost Son's story. He had managed to keep his truly dark, secret sins hidden. The rumours never told how deep the darkness was in this lost Son's heart. The rumours never told how a part of him wished he had been punished and executed. That would at least be a permanent escape from an internal world of turmoil. Another wave of emotional pain brutally ripped right through him. Once again he reached for his half full bottle.

A prostitute lay asleep beside him. She was a sedative to numb the reality that his heart was void of love. He liked her. But he hated her. He didn't even know why he hated her. He hadn't processed his own emotions deeply enough to understand what was really controlling them and what was really controlling him – but something about her made him angry. He wasn't aware that he hated her because she represented the fact that what he desired most was out of his reach.

Thinking about the reasons behind his emotions was an unbearable feeling. He never went there. He had another drink.

The truth that lived deeper than his conscious awareness and dwelt in his unexplored subconscious mind was that this prostitute made him angry because he believed that was the only way he could get love and deep down he knew it wasn't real love. He hated her because she reminded him that he did not believe he was worthy of love. He had never believed that he was worthy of love.

***“...he believed that
he wasn't worthy
of love period.”***

That was why he hated his Father too. He lived in the same house with that man his whole life and he had never felt worthy of his love. He didn't simply believe that he wasn't worthy of his Father's love, he believed that he wasn't worthy of love period. He didn't just hate his Father because of this, most of all he hated himself.

Beneath the surface of things, even as he grew up he had always been tormented by a ferocious sense of inadequacy. Ever since he could remember he had felt this way and been tormented by the insecurities associated with beliefs of inadequacy. It festered into a world of shame and condemnation and a raging case of unworthiness. Perceived inadequacies had become his prison that isolated him from the possibility of ever receiving love – regardless of how close and how unconditional that love had always been. As he looked out the window at the moon he began thinking to himself again that his loveless existence could never change. His heart overflowed with hopelessness. A silent tear made its way from his heart to his chin.

Finally it starts getting better for the crowd as they hear that having wasted all his wealth this wicked Son is in poverty. Not only is he in poverty, he is subjected to the ultimate humiliation of being the servant of pigs. Pigs were considered ceremonially unclean animals and raising pigs was unclean work. This Son is now completely defiled and has reached the pinnacle of failure. The crowd is waiting for justice!

He didn't go straight to the pigs. This Son was so addicted to his self-medicating practices that he subjected himself to desperate acts in order to fund his addiction. These desperate acts only intensified the consuming conviction of his own inadequacy. Eventually every door closed on him. His perpetual oppression by inadequacy, shame, condemnation and unworthiness made healthy relationships impossible. Everywhere he went relationships failed and chaos followed.

He had nothing. He had no one. He was homeless. He was broke. He didn't belong anywhere. On top of all this he was going through major withdrawals.

At the end of himself he sat down in the shade. His back against a tree, his face towards the street. The Middle Eastern sun was blazing. Beads of sweat swelled up from his forehead. His tongue dried out inside his mouth. The unsatisfied urges of his alcohol addiction whipped him repeatedly and ruthlessly. The withdrawals caused his body to spontaneously spasm and tremble.

One of the high class prostitutes that he had spent so many nights with walked along the street in front of him ready for work. His heart rate increased. His blood started pumping. They had shared so many beautiful moments. He called out to her and she turned. Her eye contact was powerful. Her eyes used to dance and hold his gaze with erotic invitations but today her eyes held no affection for him. No acceptance. Today her eyes fuelled his internal narrative of unworthiness and rejection.

All the facades that his money had bought him faded like smoke. Despite all the sex and wild moments they had shared this was the most vulnerable she had ever been with him. This was their most honest moment. There was no erotic dance in her eyes. Now the honesty in her eyes shattered the illusions she had once portrayed. The truth in her eyes struck him forcefully. He finally realised the painful truth that the shame inspired hatred that he had felt towards her was perfectly mutual.

The floggings of withdrawal and the floggings of inadequacy matched each other in their relentless administration of torture. Physically, emotionally and spiritually he was pioneering new depths of internal darkness. His only remaining friend, his only remaining escape was sleep. Overwhelmed by everything, he lay down in the shade and closed his eyes. He slept and the afternoon quietly passed away.

Instead of being woken by a sleep terror this time, he was woken by a bearded man – an ugly bearded man. This bearded man was graphically ugly. Inside and out. The ugly bearded man kicked him in the leg – hard.

The twisted odour of narcissism clung to this ugly bearded man like the stench of the pigs he farmed. As the Son's eyes adjusted to the light and to consciousness, he could make out the eyes of the ugly bearded man who stood above him. The first thing he noticed was the absence of kindness and warmth. Instead he immediately saw lethal brutality and manipulation flashing in his eyes.

The kick in the leg turned out to be a job offer.

“His only remaining friend, his only remaining escape was sleep.”

He got it too! He got the only job he was fit for – feeding pigs. There was no minimum wage. He was a glorified slave. The ugly, stingy bearded man didn't care if this homeless bum lived or died.

"If he dies he can be pig food. Until then this street rat can feed my pigs." Thought the ugly bearded man.

It was while he was in this dark place that the Son began coming to his senses. He assessed his circumstances and came to the sobering conclusion that if he didn't figure out something soon he was going to starve to death. But which was worse? Starve to death or go back and face his Father after the way he had publicly betrayed him, dishonoured him and squandered the family's wealth? Then there was the fact that the whole village and probably the whole country wanted him dead! The thought of it instantly released a paralysing explosion of fear and shame through his whole being. Maybe dying here with these pigs and his ugly bearded boss

was better than that? He carried on feeding the pigs and tried to avoid thinking about his Father.

Time ticked by and the famine in the land caused the food supply to slowly wither away. The choice the Son had to make started to become very, very real. Die of starvation or return to his Father and face the consequences – however severe they may be? Again the thought of it was like a lightning strike of fear, shame and negative emotions... The sense of being unworthy that he had felt before he left home was now out of control and coursing through his soul like venom.

He was persuaded that the darkness he had walked in defined him. His failure to attain moral perfection reinforced his conviction that he was worthless and unlovable. His secret sins tormented him with an ever-present excruciating shame. He decided to spend more time with the pigs and his ugly bearded boss rather than face his Father.

COURAGE

The famine continued stripping the land bare. Hope for this nation evaporated like the streams. He finally decided that returning to his Father was his only survival option. The withdrawal symptoms were subsiding. His mind began to clear a little.

Throughout this story the Father is a constant. He is always a good Father. The culture of the day had judged him as a moral failure, despite the fact that this Father's morals clearly surpassed their interpretation of morality. This Father has his own normal. He has his own standard – and that standard is a love that never fails. The Father's standard is a mercy that triumphs over judgment.

If this Son had understood how loved he had always been and how much his Father had always desired relationship with him, he would never have come to the place where he didn't care if his Father lived or died. The reality is that this Son misperceived who his Father really was. This Son had a false definition of his Father, which caused a dramatic relational disconnection. The belief that he was inadequate, unworthy and unlovable prevented him from ever seeing the truth that His Father had always loved him with a perfect love.

Even as he embarks on that dry and dusty road towards home... It is clear that he still has no grasp of the extreme love that his Father has

for him. I wonder how many times the fear and shame stopped him in his tracks or caused him to turn back towards the pigs or even run towards the pigs?

Leaving wasn't easy for the Son. There were internal and external obstacles. One obstacle being that his ugly bearded boss didn't like his slaves running away. Officially he wasn't a slave, but he didn't exactly have a job contract. In the abusive eyes of his ugly bearded boss who didn't care if he lived or died, he was effectively a slave. He slipped out in the night with a stash of stolen pig food to eat on the road and put as much distance between himself and his ugly bearded boss as he possibly could. For the first week he travelled at night and hid by day.

He has now lost count of how many days he has been walking. Hungry, exhausted and emotionally drained the Son reaches the border of Israel. After three more days of walking he can finally see his village on the horizon. He wore a ragged cape with a large hood that covered most of his face. He didn't want to be seen and so far no one on the road had recognised him. However, as the hills started to become more familiar and he started coming closer to the village that he grew up in, other travellers on the road began looking twice.

He was a curious sight. With his down cast look, his bare feet, poor dress and unpleasant aroma. He appeared a little suspicious. Perhaps they perceived he was a runaway slave? A boy he went to school with walked right passed him.

"Did he recognise me?" Thought the Son to himself in shock as his heart began thumping. They both kept walking...

He had to walk right through the village to get to the farm, so he decided to walk that section in the dark. He found a discreet place to camp a day's walk from home. He hid there and tried unsuccessfully to sleep until just after midnight.

"The closer he came to his Father, the more intense the mental self harm became."

Although he was used to fear, anxiety and stress; he was now experiencing whole new levels of emotional chaos. But he could see no other viable survival option.

Die with the pigs or face his Father? Honestly, right now, as the fear and shame ravaged him internally – dying with the pigs was becoming more and more appealing. Compared to how savagely his own mind was treating him right now – his ugly bearded boss was saintly. Unlike his ugly bearded boss, the Son could not escape himself. The closer he came to his Father, the more intense the mental self harm became. If he hadn't walked so far to get to where he now was, he may actually have chosen death with the pigs. His feelings of self hatred reached a record high. Every step he took towards his Father and towards the consequences of his past was exponentially harder than the last. Head down and anxiety high he forced himself to walk on.

It was a motionless morning. The road into town was dark, silent and empty. This was it – today he would see his Father. As he walked he pondered as many potential outcomes as possible. Every one of them scared him. Every one of them reinforced his belief in his own inadequacy and every one of them endorsed this constantly growing hatred of himself. Today – may even be the day he dies?

It took several hours to make his way to the edge of the village. A few lamps burned in houses in the village itself and he moved from shadow to shadow. The occasional dog barked and rosters crowed at random. But he made it through the

village unseen. Soon he stood on the crest of a hill, overlooking the village behind him. The sun was rising. The cover of darkness was all but gone. Half a days walk lay before him and his past and his future. Even though he was walking quickly his whole body was covered in a cold sweat of pure dread.

He had already passed a handful of people in the dark. The road would now start to get much busier. Less than an hour later one of his old neighbours approached with three donkeys fully loaded and bound for the village.

“Shalom,” said the neighbour.

“Shalom.” Replied the son with his face to the ground. For a second the neighbour thought he recognised the voice. After they passed each other they both looked back at the same time and for a brief moment, they locked eyes. The neighbour knew instantly who it was and the Son saw condemnation begin to flicker like hell fire in his eyes. They both turned and picked up their pace.

The Son knew that news of his return would very soon be known throughout the entire district. The severe consequences that he had left behind, had waited patiently for his return. The neighbour knew as well as the Son the risk that the Son had taken in returning. The neighbour knew that there may be a stoning today. It was his responsibility to tell the village the news. Everything else went on hold as the demand for justice took centre stage.

The Son hurried on as discreetly as he could. Despite his desire to remain invisible a number of people recognised him. He heard some people speaking to him, others shouting at him. But he could barely even register their existence. He was under so much internal pressure that it required every ounce of his focus and energy to take each step. He was consumed with agonizing thoughts of his Father. He blocked out everything else and kept walking.

TERRIFYING VULNERABILITY

Finally the Father’s farm was in view! The climatic reunion drew ominously close and the Son took one more step. He stepped over the horizon line and came into the Father’s view. The Son had no idea what the Father’s response was going to be? He paused before walking a little further down the hill. Suddenly he saw that his Father was sprinting towards him. He stopped there. Literally frozen in panic.

He was unaware that a mob had gathered and was fast approaching on the road just a quarter of a mile behind him. Justice was a serious community responsibility. Now justice would finally be served!

At best the Son thought he may be able to desperately beg for mercy and possibly be given the role of a servant in his Father’s house? That would be better than dying with the pigs and dealing with his ugly bearded boss. His best case scenario was begging for the right to become a servant, his worst case scenarios were possibly that beating he deserved... or worse the stoning that the village would demand?

One thing was very clear. The Son believed that because of his actions he had forfeited any previous right to Sonship. At least the crowd agreed with something in this story that Jesus was telling. This Son’s behaviour had completely forfeited him from any right to Sonship – ever!

***“He began to shake
physically as fear and
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his veins like thunder.”***

The closer his Father ran, the more terrified the Son became. All the strength that he had mustered to come this far and overcome so much fear and shame had taken its toll. He was at breaking point. As he watched the unusual speed of his Father charging down the road his sense of alarm began to grow. He began to shake physically as fear and shame rumbled through his veins like thunder. He can no longer hide from his past. He cannot self medicate. He is forced to face this great terror in his heart. His Father quickly draws near.

The Father had been watching, waiting and longing for his Son to come home. Longing for relationship, longing for reconciliation, longing for intimacy. Longing for his Son to see him for who he really was and not as the monstrous Father that the Son's imagination had invented. The Father had never been able to overcome the Son's persuasion that he was unworthy of love. The Son's own persuasion that he was unlovable had always prevented him from receiving his Father's love.

No matter how desperately the Father longed to pour out his love on his Son, the Son could never receive it. Because the Son never received it, he never felt loved and the Son used this “unloved” feeling as justification for his theory that his Father had never loved him and that he would never be worthy of love. The Son's image of the Father was so warped that he expected the worst from this moment. His Father kept running... Not jogging. The Father was in full flight!

Jesus crowd of listeners can't believe that the Son didn't die with the pigs! How did he manage to

escape justice once again! But now that the Son has been forced to crawl back to his Father – justice can at last be served! How cunning of the Father to wait until the Son has to come crawling back before administering a severe punishment on top of his ultimate humiliation. Perhaps there is hope for this Father to redeem himself in the eyes of the crowd. The Father is running towards this defiled, useless, disgusting boy and this rebellious wicked outcast is about to get the pent up wrath of an offended Father unleashed on him in full fury!

The Son can't take his eyes off his Father. This was it. This was the moment of truth. His entire focus was consumed by His Father. He did not see the growing crowd behind him; gathering stones and drawing dangerously close. They were rushing. They were aggressive. The Father could see the crowd coming. The Father had sat through many conversations with his own relatives, neighbours and friends as they told him what they would do to his Son if he ever showed his face again. There was no way he was going to give them a chance to inflict their justice. The Father's love raced the wrath of the crowd.

***“He instantly embraces
his Son with a deep
compassion.”***

Heart pounding, chest heaving, covered in sweat the Father reaches his Son. He instantly embraces his Son with a deep compassion and a fiery love! Consuming the Son in arms of love. The Father holds his child who once was lost but now is found! The Son could not hug back. He could not express affection. He stood there. Rigid yet trembling. The Son is obsessed with and oppressed by the conviction of his own

inadequacy. He breaks down and gets to the root issue of what he has been secretly feeling forever.

It all comes out before his Father as he gets more vulnerable than he has ever been and admits the truth of what's really causing the emotional turmoil in his heart. Everything inside him explodes, the tears, the fears, the shame, the desperation:

"I'm not worthy to be called your Son!!!". He screamed. Tears and emotion are everywhere. This conviction that he was inadequate and unworthy to be called a Son is what drove him from home in the first place. Now it all comes out with passion, anxiety, tears, shame and brokenness. The Son's tears cover his Father and the Father's kisses cover his Son.

A SEAT AT THE TABLE

The unconditional acceptance, the love, the honour and the favour that the Father lavishes on the Son leaves everyone bewildered. The crowd listening to Jesus cannot believe what has just happened. This is the worst, most scandalous story they have ever heard. It makes no sense! In fact it makes them vibrate with anger! The Son is speechless, hyperventilating, gasping for breath and choking on a rising stream of tears. The Father is ecstatic!

***"They begin to feel...
physically aching to know
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that has been poured
out on this Son."***

When the older brother hears about it, he is wild. The only one that Jesus audience can relate to is the older brother and his outrage at the absence of the flogging of a lifetime or worse! But as this story sinks in, as they reflect on this foreign love, a deep place in their hearts is jealous to experience it for themselves. They begin to feel a once dormant, deprived part of their hearts

physically aching to know the radical love that has been poured out on this Son. Some of them even dare to imagine what it would be like to be loved so unconditionally? But in the rush of the moment and with the pressing demand for wrath to be poured out. They silenced their curious hearts.

Shouts begin to rise up from the gathering. Deadly demands for justice ring out from the priests, the elders, the lawyers, the cousins, the uncles, aunties and friends. What will the Father's decision be? What shall be done with this worthless Son? They grip their rocks in rage.

The gentle love and kindness in the Father's eyes blind-sides and captivates the Son. They immerse themselves in each other's eyes. The Father's eyes tell a story that the Son has never known before. The Son has known the looks of rejection, hatred, brutality and condemnation, but no matter how deeply he reaches into his Father's eyes there is not a trace of these things. He plunges desperately into these eyes expecting that rejection is hidden somewhere inside. His Father's eyes are baptising him in the purest love that he has ever encountered. The rejection that he assumed was there had never existed. Waves of acceptance crash over him again and again. He

can't understand why he had never seen it there before, but he can see it clearly now – the eyes of the Father are an entire cosmos of unspeakable, ecstatic delight in his Son.

The Son can see that this limitless love in his Father's eyes could take a thousand life times to explore. It is beyond his capacity to understand. He doesn't know why he's never seen it before. But he cannot ignore it, he cannot resist it and he cannot live without it! For the first time since he was a boy, he buries his face in his Father's chest. They grip each other in an embrace that simultaneously communicates a lifetime full of pain and a future full of hope.

The Father has a premeditated decision to the Son's begging and the crowd's demands. He does not let the Son continue to berate himself and beg like a slave. The Father breaks everyone's cultural protocols and expectations as he demonstrates unconditional love for his Son. The Son himself is in serious shock! Where is the wrath of the monstrous Father that he believed had never loved him?

The Father's love collides with his false perceptions like a sledgehammer on glass! The core beliefs that he built his world on are shattering! The love is tangible and strong. So strong that the Son loses all his strength. An electric love surges right through him. He melts in his Father's arms. The Father holds him up in this eternally desired expression of delight. For the first time in his memory, the Son drops his guard. For a moment his sense of inadequacy is eclipsed by his Father's love and he receives this divine love into the depths of his love starved soul. His famished soul feasts at the same time as an uncontrollable flood of tears and snot and pain begin pouring from the Son. The double edged blade of love penetrates his heart – it's hurting but it's healing.

“The level of offense in the crowd is now rising. Where is the justice?”

The Father continues to demonstrate to the Son and to everyone watching his unreserved endorsement of the legitimacy of his Son's Sonship. At this stage the Son's world is spinning out of control! The Father calls for his finest robe. Immediately he places his most exquisite robe on his Son. This robe is a statement of the Father's protection of the Son. The Son and the mob could forget all thoughts of punishment from the Father. He is now wearing the finest robe of the household. It is his Father's covering. It represents the Father meeting the Son's need for protection. It is a declaration of safety to the Son. This act of love is casting out all fear of punishment.

The level of offense in the crowd is now rising. Where is the justice? To them this is immoral! Scandalous! Against the laws of God and nature! This is blasphemy, heresy and surely Gentile theology all in one! They believed that justice looked like punishment. The Father is overwhelmed with delight! He has no regard for the crowds preconceived assumptions that he would pour out wrath on his Son. The Father had no intention of punishment. It wasn't what he had ever wanted. To the Father justice looked like redemption and he got exactly what he wanted – his Son! The crowd's appetite for blood is left completely unsatisfied by the Father.

Moments later the Father rushes a ring onto his Son's finger. This ring symbolises identity. In giving this ring the Father is meeting the Son's extreme need for identity. The Father is saying that everything, which the Son once believed defined him; all his failure, all his secret sin, everything negative that had ever been said about him or that he had believed about himself

is irrelevant. This ring symbolises the name, nature and identity of the family and declares to the Son that he is exclusively defined by his Father. This ring declares to the Son that the only valid reference point for his identity comes from his Father. By doing this the Father also powerfully communicates that this Son has a place of belonging in this family. There is a seat for him at the family table.

The Son can't stand. He is overwhelmed with love and emotion. He collapses to the ground and servants run to him. Sandals are tied to his feet. Slaves and servants did not wear sandals. This act of the Father was a declaration of provision. The Father was saying that he would not receive him back as a slave or a servant, he would only receive him back as a Son and he would provide as a Father. Each of these three actions endorsed the legitimacy of the Son's Sonship. Each of these actions revealed the nature of the Father to supply protection, identity and provision.

Following this the Father killed the fattened calf. This calf would have been enough to feed the whole village. It was a custom for wealthy families to invite the whole town or village to a banquet to celebrate bar mitzvah. Bar mitzvah is a coming of age celebration where a Son is legally and publicly recognised as a Son with all the legal rights and responsibilities of Sonship. A bar mitzvah took place on a Son's 13th birthday. This was not a bar mitzvah celebration, but the Father was making a public statement similar to that of a bar mitzvah in the sense that the Father was publicly celebrating, recognizing and endorsing the full rights, responsibilities and legitimacy of his Son's Sonship. The whole village was invited! The Father wanted to endorse his Son's Sonship in the most public way possible.

Both the community around the Father in the story and Jesus audience were having major culture shock as they tried to process the actions

“The Son was received home as the object of his Father's delight!”

of this eccentric, heretical, villainous Father. This Father defied their cultural expectations for wrath and punishment and dumbfounded them with his unconditional acceptance and extravagant love! The Son was received home as the object of his Father's delight! While the Son still smelt like a pigsty the Father had wrapped him up in his passionate embrace. Instead of separation, wrath, humiliation and bloodshed this Son is sitting in the best seat, wearing the best robe, wearing a ring on his finger and brand new sandals on his feet at a feast thrown in his honour to celebrate and endorse the legitimacy of his Sonship! This Son has discovered his seat at the table.

Instead of dying with the pigs, he is dining with the Father.

Although the crowd was confused, speechless and offended, the story awakened within each of them a deep and ancient desire to experience such a love for themselves. A jealousy for such a love began to sting the open wounds of lack and inadequacy in their own hearts. Could such a love be any more than mythology or heresy? They reflected on their own experiences of what a Father's love could look like. They all had different images coming to mind. “Could I ever hope to experience a love like this?” they wondered secretly.

Even the Son is seriously questioning if this is too good to be true? Is this really happening? All his expectations, his entire world view, his reality has been completely devastated by his Father's love. Truth is staring him in the face and declaring that life is better and brighter than he had ever

imagined! His heart, his brain, his emotions, his spirit and his soul are all exploding at the same time! It's too much to grasp the full meaning of everything. This love has blown a brain fuse in the Son. He makes the best decision of his life and chooses to simply receive his Papa's love. Even though it's beyond his comprehension and his mind is spinning, his heart knows that he belongs in this seat at his Father's table. Truth is convincing him that he is perfectly loved.

For the first time in his life he is starting to see his Papa as he really is. He is discovering that his Papa is a perfect lover! The more accurately he sees his Papa, the more he loves him! The offense and hatred he once held towards his Father has been swallowed up by love and honour. His Papa's love is redefining everything

that he ever knew about love. He has never felt so safe. He has never felt so secure. In the context of perfect safety, vulnerability is losing its terror. Surrounded by safety, authenticity cautiously emerges as do snails antennae. The masks of false identities that the Son had worn as self protection mechanisms were becoming irrelevant. This unconditional acceptance is drawing the Son outside of himself.

He is discovering that nothing he has ever experienced compares to the ecstasy and the bliss of this perfect love! This once lost Son has found a seat at the table. This once lost Son is discovering the bliss of Sonship! A genuine smile lights up his face. His eyes radiate with the delight of a Son who understands that he is perfectly loved.

CONCLUSION

*The term Sonship is used here in a generic non-gender specific way.

*The term identity is used here to refer to the generic identity of humanity as those made in the image of God, not to a persons unique individuality and personality.

This parable of the good Father is Jesus most masterful articulation of the good news! Jesus communicates the essence of the good news with power and precision. Jesus presents His definition of perfect theology (who God is) and His definition of the gospel (what the good news is) in one of the most heart gripping stories in the entire Bible: The Father. Betrayal. Scandal. Secrets. Fear. Shame. Heartbreak. Villainy. Brokenness. Courage. Forgiveness. Love. Tragedy. Redemption. Identity. Reconciliation. Restoration. Sonship. Family. Belonging. Hope.

This story incorporates the most powerful themes in life. It answers the most profound questions in life. The pinnacle revelation in the midst of it all is the unconditional, unfailing, unparalleled love of our Father in Heaven, whose unshakeable love conquers the most hideous betrayals without flinching or being damaged or reduced or inhibited or restricted in any way. It's a love that defies every adversity and never relents. A love that yearns for redemption not punishment and reconciliation not distance.

Using this story Jesus exposes that the root issues of the human heart are beliefs in lack and inadequacy that flow from false definitions of our Father in Heaven and false definitions of our own identity. When we have a false definition of who our Father in Heaven is we come to believe that we will lack the things that we need. Protection. Provision. Identity. Whenever we believe that

we will be in lack, it produces fear. The nature of love, the nature of the Father is to supply. Lack produces fear, but love – love supplies! That's how love casts out all fear – love brings a promise with it that there will be more than enough!

Lack produces fear, but love supplies. Love supplies the truth that we need to be free from fear. Love supplies the revelation that our hearts need to be fully persuaded of our Father's provision. When we are fully persuaded that our Father in Heaven will provide for us then it will be clearly evidenced by the reality that there is no fear, anxiety or worry in our lives.

The only way to get free from fear is by discovering what this Son discovered. Eventually he discovered that his Father's love was unconditional and he had always been loved! Nothing he did or didn't do ever stopped the Father from loving him; that is who the Father is – a perfect lover!

After a lifetime of living in an unnecessary love deficit the Son came to realise that what he did or didn't do altered his ability to receive his Father's unconditional love. It took great courage from the Son to make the journey home and to become vulnerable with his Father, however it was in the context of his courage and vulnerability that he discovered the present reality of the love with which his Father had always loved him.

The Father's unconditional acceptance establishes an atmosphere of perfect safety. An atmosphere that is safe to come home to. A place where it's safe to be honest, real, transparent and vulnerable. A place where it's safe to be ourselves. In the context of unconditional acceptance we can expose ourselves and still be loved. We can be known. We can be intimate without fear of rejection. In this place of unconditional acceptance we are given the opportunity to build trust. As we protect and steward trust with safe behaviour intimacy grows. As intimacy develops a sense of belonging grows with it.

As the Son courageously came home into that atmosphere of safety and acceptance his heart melted. He repositioned his heart from a place of offense towards his Father to a posture of honour towards his Father. He discovered that offense shut his heart down to receiving love, but honour opened his heart up to receive his Father's love. Honour opened the flood gates for a baptism in the Father's love!

A false definition of our Father in Heaven is not only the source of lack and fear, it is also the root of inadequacy and shame. We were made in the image of our Father, our Papa in Heaven. He is the blueprint of our divine design. We were made perfectly in His image and He alone defines us. However, if we are not fully persuaded that we are perfectly made in the image of our Father in Heaven then we begin to experience feelings associated with beliefs of inadequacy.

Perfection is the secret standard inside of every human soul that we measure ourselves by. If we come to believe that we are less than perfect in any way then inadequacy and shame begin to spread like a vicious rash on our soul. The pathway to freedom from shame is becoming fully persuaded that despite what you have been through in life the only valid reference for your identity is your Papa in Heaven. Nothing we have ever experienced in life has any authority to redefine that which our Father in Heaven has already exclusively defined in His image. Our Papa in Heaven made us in His image and we have been forever defined by Him alone!

Believing in lack will produce fear and believing in inadequacy will produce shame. Humans are allergic to shame. Shame is a toxic substance. Shame comes from believing that you as an individual are inadequate in some way. The belief that we are inadequate comes from believing that things we have experienced have authority to define our identity.

This world is full of extreme trauma. I have more

“We have been exclusively defined by our Father in Heaven. He is the only valid reference point for our identity.”

friends than I can count who have been through extreme abuse and trauma. The one's that get free from shame are the ones that embrace the truth that their experiences have no authority to define their identity. The negative words spoken over their lives, the neglect they suffered, the rape, the violence, the incest, the rejection, the betrayal, the failure, the sin, the wounds, the fall – the works! None of these things have any authority to define us! Nothing that we have ever experienced has the authority to redefine that which the Father has already exclusively defined in His image! We have been exclusively defined by our Father in Heaven. He is the only valid reference point for our identity. He is the blueprint of our divine design.

If we are experiencing condemnation, shame or a belief of unworthiness in any expression in our lives it is because we have allowed ourselves to be defined by something that has no authority to define us. There is one outstanding and exclusive definition of our identity that has the executive authority to define us and that is Jesus. Jesus perfectly revealed and modelled our Father in Heaven and in doing so, He perfectly articulated humanities true identity as those made in God's image. Every form of information that you have ever received that gives definition to your identity, which is not in harmony with Christ is irrelevant.

The Son was called a Son the entire story. Even in his darkest hour the Son was still as Son as a Son can be. Discovering his Sonship required the lies in his belief system to be shattered entirely!

His whole way of processing what defined him had to be completely rewired. He had always believed that what he did, what people said and what he experienced defined his identity.

This way of thinking is a system rigged to fail, a system that will keep us chained to inadequacy, shame and condemnation. The Son discovered that the legitimacy of his Sonship had never been compromised by all his failures and rebellion. As the Father endorsed the authenticity of his Sonship he began to see that the only valid reference point for his identity was his Father. He was exclusively defined by his Father and he had always been as Son as a Son can be.

Combining these two revelations in our lives empowers us to discover the bliss of Sonship that this Son discovered in Jesus' gospel narrative. Discovering unconditional love and unconditional Sonship is what seats us at our Father's table. Our Papa is a perfect lover who loves us perfectly and we are exclusively made and defined in his image. We are all perfectly loved and we are all perfectly worthy of perfect love. We have not been qualified or defined by our own failed attempts at perfection, we have been qualified and defined by our Papa in Heaven who made us in His image and who has declared that we are His beloved children.

Just as the Son in the story, your Father in Heaven longs to have you return home. He has reserved a seat at the table for you! He longs to celebrate you the way the Son in the story was celebrated. He longs to feast with you at the family table! He longs to place His robe of protection over you, to place a defining ring on your finger, to promise you provision and to welcome you home as a beloved child! He wants you to take your place at the banqueting table! Your Papa longs to publicly celebrate and endorse the legitimacy of your Sonship. He wants the whole world to know that you are perfectly, unconditionally, extravagantly accepted and loved by Him!



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