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Bible Glossary, People & Places

Prodigal Son

Sermon Reference

The sermon's central character in the parable found in Luke 15, representing a son who asks for his inheritance early, leaves home to a distant country, wastes his wealth in reckless living, and subsequently experiences destitution in a foreign land. His return home demonstrates repentance and restoration, and the father's joyous reception symbolizes the unconditional love and forgiveness of the Father for lost children.

Background Context

The parable of the prodigal son is situated in Luke 15:11-32. It is the third in a series of parables Jesus tells about lost things—first the lost sheep and then the lost coin—before narrating this story about two sons and their father. The younger son, seeking freedom and independence, demands his inheritance prematurely, which, in Jewish culture, would traditionally be received upon the father's death. By asking for it early, he essentially is cutting off familial ties. He then journeys to a 'far country,' symbolizing both physical and spiritual distance from the father's household and represents a state of lostness and separation from covenantal blessings.

The younger son squanders the inheritance on sinful and reckless living, which leads to extreme poverty and hunger. His plight is so severe that he is forced to feed pigs, an unclean animal for Jews, emphasizing the depth of his fall from grace and spiritual defilement. He eventually comes to himself, recognizing his need for repentance and restoration, deciding to return home, confessing his sins, and accepting a servant's position if accepted.

The father's joyful acceptance and restoration of the son illustrate God's redemptive grace and love for repentant sinners. Historically, this parable addresses not only individuals but also communities, reflecting Jewish societal values and the theological understanding of sin, repentance, and forgiveness in first-century Judea. It also juxtaposes two types of lostness: the younger son who is openly rebellious and lost in sin, and the elder son who remains at home but struggles with bitterness and self-righteousness. The elder son's resentment at the father's grace towards the younger mirrors the challenges in religious communities regarding repentance and inclusion. This makes the parable a profound study on grace, repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

In the broader biblical narrative, the prodigal son's story becomes a powerful metaphor for God's redemptive love towards humanity. It illustrates the heart of the Father who actively seeks the lost, who is ready to forgive, restore, and celebrate the return of a lost child. The story reflects the New Testament theme of salvation available to all, calling sinners to repentance, and addressing both the wandering sinner and the self-righteous believer. The son's humility and confession exemplify the true spirit of repentance, encapsulated in the Greek term 'metanoia,' meaning a transformative change of mind and heart.

In Christian theology and preaching, the prodigal son is often used as an illustration of the human condition—characterized by rebellion and estrangement—and the promise of restoration through God's grace. It emphasizes that no matter the depth of sin or lostness, the path back to God is open, and the Father is ready to receive with open arms. This parable serves as a key biblical understanding of grace, mercy, and the nature of God's love that transcends human failings.

Importance in the Bible

The prodigal son parable holds a vital place in the biblical canon as one of the most profound insights into the character of God's grace and forgiveness. It portrays God as an actively loving Father who seeks the lost and rejoices when they return. It underscores the themes of repentance and restoration foundational to Christian soteriology. The prodigal son serves not only as a call to return to God for those who have strayed but also a challenge to those within the faith community to embrace grace with open hearts. It continues to inspire countless sermons, theological reflections, and pastoral applications as a hallmark of the New Testament's message of salvation and divine love.

The Father (in the Parable of the Prodigal Son)

Sermon Reference

The Father character in the prodigal son parable represents the loving, gracious, and forgiving nature of God. He willingly gives the inheritance to the younger son, waits eagerly for the son's return, and upon his homecoming, runs out to embrace him and restore him fully as a son, not a servant. The father's heart is emblematic of God's unceasing love and readiness to forgive and celebrate the return of sinners.

Background Context

In the cultural context of the first-century Jewish family, a father held significant authority and was the patriarch who controlled the estate and inheritance. The act of a father dividing his inheritance while still alive, as the prodigal son demands, was unusual and would have been legally permissible but socially contentious. It implied a breakdown of family relationships and often signaled estrangement. Yet, the father in the parable honors the son's request, demonstrating an openness that reflects God's willingness to permit human free will, even when it leads to rebellion and separation. Rather than refusing or punishing, he allows the son to depart, respecting his desires but clearly maintaining a loving, expectant heart.

The father's behavior upon the son's return overturns social norms of honor and shame. Instead of indignation, punishment, or public humiliation, the father responds with compassion, running to meet his son, embracing him, and reinstating him fully as a son through gifts like the best robe, a ring, and killing the fatted calf to celebrate. This reaction epitomizes radical grace—an unmerited, generous acceptance that restores dignity and position in the family. In an honor-shame societal framework, this is a striking and countercultural image of forgiveness and restoration.

The other son in the parable represents the challenge the father faces among those who have remained faithful but struggle with jealousy and resentment. The father's words to the elder son—'Everything I have is yours'—affirm his love and generosity toward all his children, both those who stay and those who stray. This portrays the fullness of God's familial love and challenges human notions of earning favor or deserving grace. The father-model thus provides a theological lens into God's inclusive and boundless mercy.

Throughout biblical theology, God as Father is a recurring image, emphasizing relational intimacy, authority, provision, and protection. The parable specifically elevates these attributes by demonstrating God's initiative in seeking the lost, welcoming the repentant, and celebrating their restoration. It conveys the message that the ultimate desire of God is reconciliation and fellowship with His children, irrespective of their past mistakes or alienation from Him.

Importance in the Bible

The father in the parable is essential in illustrating the character and heart of God as revealed in the New Testament. He symbolizes divine forgiveness, mercy, and unconditional love that transcend human limitations and societal norms. This image profoundly shapes Christian understanding of God's nature—not as a distant or punitive figure but as one who actively pursues sinners and desires their restoration. His readiness to embrace the wayward son and celebrate his return is a tactile demonstration of grace integral to Christian theology. Moreover, his interactions with both sons highlight the inclusivity of God's grace towards both repentant sinners and faithful believers. The father's portrayal enriches the biblical narrative by confronting issues of grace, justice, mercy, and family dynamics, making him a central figure for understanding the Gospel message of reconciliation.

The Elder Son

Sermon Reference

In the prodigal son parable, the elder son represents the one who remains at home, obedient and diligent, yet struggles with resentment and jealousy when unmerited grace is shown to his younger, wayward brother. His feelings of bitterness illustrate challenges in accepting God's grace extended to repentant sinners and underline family relational dynamics even after restoration occurs.

Background Context

Within the context of the Jewish family structure, the elder son held a privileged position, managing the estate during the father's absence and ensuring family interests were maintained. His obedience and constant presence in the household symbolize faithfulness and adherence to tradition and law. However, despite his fidelity, the elder son's reaction to his brother's return reveals internal conflict, jealousy, and a sense of injustice. This emotional struggle reflects human tendencies toward self-righteousness and the challenge in embracing grace extended to others, especially those who have lived in open rebellion.

The elder son's objection to the father's celebration exposes the tension between law and grace prevalent in first-century Judaism and ongoing Christian discourse. The elder son's viewpoint echoes the Pharisaical attitudes Jesus opposed: the notion that righteousness is earned by works and that grace or forgiveness should be withheld from sinners. His refusal to join the celebration highlights emotional and relational alienation despite physical presence in the father's house. This gap between external obedience and internal bitterness exposes the complex dynamic of faithfulness that is not necessarily equated with wholehearted love and joy.

The father's response to the elder son affirms both his worth and the abundant grace he shares with all his children. By stating 'All that I have is yours,' the father reassures the elder son of his place and inheritance, inviting him to rejoice in the restoration of his brother rather than harbor resentment. This highlights the biblical theme that God's grace is not a limited resource but infinitely generous. It also admonishes believers to overcome envy and judgment, instead embracing grace and unity.

The elder son's experience adds depth to the parable and biblical theology by portraying the complexities of human response to divine grace. It challenges believers to examine their hearts for attitudes of jealousy, entitlement, and unforgiveness. His character teaches the necessity of compassion and rejoicing over others' repentance and restoration. The elder son's struggle with grace encourages self-reflection on what it means to live in right relationship with God and others, fully embracing the joy of salvation and fellowship.

Importance in the Bible

The elder son is crucial for understanding the full spectrum of human responses to God's grace, underscoring that distance from God is not only physical departure but can also be manifested in hardened hearts and bitterness. His role provides a counterpoint to the wayward younger son, illuminating the challenges within religious communities to fully accept repentance and unconditional love. The elder son's struggle teaches believers about humility, compassion, and the call to rejoice over restoration rather than self-righteous judgment. His portrayal deepens the interpretation of grace as boundless and designed for all God's children, emphasizing themes of reconciliation not only with God but within families and communities. Thus, the elder son is indispensable in the theological discourse on repentance, grace, and community life in the Christian faith.

Oral Roberts University

Sermon Reference

The setting for the TV ministry program 'World Impact' hosted by Dr. Billy Wilson, located on the campus of Oral Roberts University (ORU). The university is referenced as the place from which the spiritual message on finding one's way home to the Father is being shared.

Background Context

Oral Roberts University, founded in 1963 by evangelist Oral Roberts, is a private evangelical university located in Tulsa, Oklahoma. It represents a significant institution in the Pentecostal and Charismatic Christian movements. The university's mission emphasizes whole-person education—mind, body, and spirit—and is dedicated to preparing students for Christian leadership and service across various professional fields. ORU's campus serves as a hub for spiritual teachings, ministry training, and Christian education.

The university's foundation reflects the legacy of Oral Roberts, who was a pioneer in faith healing ministry and televangelism. ORU has been influential in forming generations of Christian leaders, ministers, and counselors equipped to integrate biblical truths with practical professions. The presence of the TV program 'World Impact' being broadcast from ORU underscores the institution's role in using media for evangelism, discipleship, and global outreach.

The theological environment of ORU is firmly rooted in Charismatic Christianity, focusing on the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, healing, prophecy, and spiritual gifts. This environment fosters a ministry emphasis on restoration, hope, and personal encounters with God, as reflected in the sermon's focus on returning to the Father's love and restoration. This setting emphasizes the integration of experience, scholarship, and ministry to encourage believers to live out their faith with understanding and compassion.

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