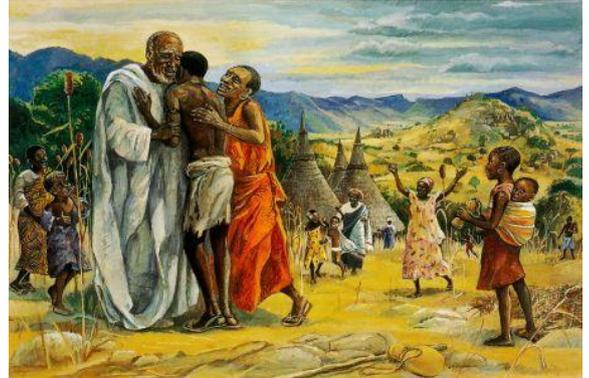


The parable of the incredible father

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Luke 15:11-32 is traditionally called the “parable of the prodigal son”, or the “parable of the lost son”. It could equally well be called the “parable of the incredible father”. Let’s look at it from the perspective of the father, rather from that of the two sons.



What is your concept of God, the Heavenly Father? Do you see Him as distant and judgmental, focused on your sin, harsh and jealous? If so your reactions to God will be based on fear, and you will always be concerned whether your behaviour meets God’s righteous standards.

Your Christian life will probably be focused on doing things to earn God’s favour, but you will never have complete assurance that you are ‘good enough’ to deserve His love.

But the ‘incredible father’ in Jesus’ parable is not like that at all. Jesus shows that the Father loves us! He wants the best for us and is totally focused on building a relationship with us in which we are accepted, supported and loved. In this relationship we will prosper and grow to reach our full potential. This will give great pleasure to our Father, and we will be secure in His love.

Our ‘incredible Father’ is a God of love!

<p><i>Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.</i></p>	<p>The younger son selfishly asked for his share of the inheritance while his father was still alive and apparently in good health.. What an outrageous request! The father could have considered it rude or insulting, but he didn't. He divided up the inheritance and gave the younger son his part, even though he knew the younger son was up to no good.</p> <p>Why? Because what the father wanted above all was a loving relationship with his son. Rather than force his son to stay at home the father realised that he needed to go away and find himself. Then he would come back and find what his father really was like.</p> <p>The father knew exactly what he wanted. He didn't want his son's obedience. He was totally motivated by love; he wanted his son's heart.</p>
<p><i>Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no-one gave him anything.</i></p>	<p>The son didn't use his share of the inheritance to create a future for himself. Rather he wasted it in wild living. Soon he had squandered it all and he ended up destitute.</p> <p>The father didn't try to rescue him from these bad choices. He wanted his son to learn some hard lessons and maybe come to his senses.</p> <p>The father wasn't indifferent to his son's plight; rather he was waiting expectantly for his son to return. His ultimate goal was to have a loving relationship with his son and that was about to be realised.</p>

<p><i>When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.'</i> So he got up and went to his father.</p> <p><i>But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.</i></p>	<p>Some years later it all became too much for the son. He humbled himself and decided to return home. He realised that life with his father was much better than the life he had chosen for himself.</p> <p>The father must have been constantly looking for his son's return because he saw the son coming while he was still a long way off. He didn't wait for his son to come to him. Rather he ran to the son and threw his arms around him and kissed him.</p> <p>The son wouldn't have known how the father was going to react as he approached so he must have been a bit nervous. He even had his 'I'm so sorry' speech ready and rehearsed. But the father wasn't angry with him. He loved the son and was delighted that he had returned. He wasn't interested in judgment or retribution. He was filled with compassion; he just wanted to see his son.</p>
<p><i>The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'</i></p> <p><i>But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'</i> So they began to celebrate.</p>	<p>The father was not manipulating the son in the way he dealt with him (as in so-called 'tough love'). Quite the opposite! He genuinely loved the son and wanted the best for him. He gave him the opportunity to find himself; repent of his sins, and return to the loving relationship that his father offered all along.</p> <p>The father loved his son all the way through this process. The son was no less loved when he wasted his life away. (He was living 'less loved', but that didn't mean he was 'less loved').</p> <p>He thought he could earn the father's love but he couldn't! The father loved him anyway, and welcomed him home with open arms. Coming home was not a chance for judgment or retribution. Rather it was an opportunity for celebration!</p>
<p><i>Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' 'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'</i></p>	<p>The older son thought he could earn his father's love by working hard and being obedient. (This is a typical religious approach, one that the Pharisees used in Jesus' day, and that many Christians use today).</p> <p>But the father wasn't motivated by the older son's obedience (as he hadn't been by the younger son's disobedience). He wanted relationship with both of them!</p> <p>The story ends in an interesting place. The younger son is inside enjoying his new-found relationship with the father; but the older son is outside, still deciding whether to enter in and enjoy the celebration. Will he come in and find how much he is loved, or will he stay outside, angry and alone, focused on how his father has been so unfair.</p>

It doesn't matter whether rebellion or religion keeps us from a relationship with God. The result is the same: we are cheated out of the loving relationship that God so much wants to have with us.

Either way God's heart is toward us. He loves us and wants the best for us. In all of His actions He works to bring about a loving relationship with us. Sometimes we may not understand these actions, especially when it seems God is distant, or we are in deep trouble. But through it all he is working to bring about His ultimate goal. He loves us and longs for this to develop into a two-way, dynamic, heart to heart relationship. He is an incredible Father!

Discussion questions

What is your concept of God? Is He a loving Father or a harsh Judge, or a mixture of both? How have you developed this concept? How has it changed over the years? What caused it to change?

The Old Testament sometimes portrays God as being jealous and judgmental, while the New Testament shows Him as a God of love who sent His Son to give us eternal life. Is the God of the Old Testament the same as the God of the New Testament? Has He changed?

Compare the heart attitudes of the three characters in the story: the father, the elder son, and the younger son. What motivated them? How did this influence their behaviour? Did they achieve what they wanted?

What are the main things that keep us away from a deep love relationship with God? What has the Father done to welcome us into this relationship? What can we do to come into and develop this relationship?

The parable shows us that two factors that keep us from relationship with God are rebellion and religion. How do each of these keep us from experiencing all of God's love? What can we do about it?

Why did Jesus tell this parable? What do you learn from it? How will you apply this learning in your Christian life?