

The Hakes recommended a book to me, the Prodigal God by Tim Keller. Keller used the word "prodigal" in the sense of extravagant. I highly recommend it. It addresses a great need in our culture, which is to understand why the "church" has hurt so many people. I use the word "church" in the sense of those who gather to worship on Sunday. If you talk to people all over our nation about their spiritual life, you'll find an often repeated story. They'll say, "I used to go to church when I was younger, but then..." and they tell you of something that happened to offend or wound their soul. Keller's book explains one reason that happens.

Jesus warned us that there would always be weeds among the wheat (Matthew 13:24-25). There will always be within a church group the unconverted and the immature Christian who act selfishly. Those who are wounded by their actions blame the church, as if the church was supposed to be perfect in this world, and I might add, as if they were not capable of doing the same. Nevertheless, their hurt is real, and their refusal to be a part is self-defense.

The parable begins with the younger son asking for his share of the inheritance. In the Jewish culture, the oldest son would receive twice what other sons received, as he was responsible to carry on the family obligations. It happened upon the death of the family patriarch. But in this parable, the rude younger son insists on his share before the father dies. He was in essence saying that all he cared about was what he could get, not about his relationship with his father. The father graciously gave his son a third of the property, which meant that part of the family farm must be sold. It also meant the other two-thirds now belonged to the older brother and the father was dependent on him.

The younger son went off to a foreign land and wasted the money. While the older brother suggests it was spent on prostitutes, we are only told it was spent on wild living. He lived it up. When the money ran out, he hired himself out to a pig farmer.

Now this was about as low as Jew could go, for they considered pigs unclean (Leviticus 11:7). He was so hungry he would have eaten the pig slop, but no one would give him any. And then a wonderful thing happened. He came to himself, or as NIV translates it, "He came to his senses." I can hear a heavenly choir singing "Hallelujah" (Luke 15:10)!

It happens today, doesn't it? Many of you have experienced this. Whether it was living for the toys that wealth could purchase, going into debt to have what your soul lusted after, or some type of addiction like pornography, drugs, or any other worldly pleasure, it's all the same. It's indulging in what brings temporal satisfaction but leaves your soul empty. Or as one song writer put it, "Looking for love in all the wrong places." In extreme cases, one must hit the very bottom and end up desperate to finally come to

Commented [notes1]: Matthew 13:24-25 (ESV)

²⁴ • He put another parable before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field,
²⁵ • but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away."

Commented [notes2]: Leviticus 11:7 (ESV)

⁷ • And the pig, because it parts the hoof and is cloven-footed but does not chew the cud, is unclean to you.

Commented [notes3]: Luke 15:10 (ESV)

¹⁰ • Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

their senses and realize the temporal will never satisfy the spirit in us. Some people never come to their senses and up dead or in jail or what may be even worse, a life enslaved to sin that is acceptable in the eyes of the world (John 8:34).

¹⁷ "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! ¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'"^{20a} And he arose and came to his father. He planned out just what he needed to say in hopes that the father he treated so rudely would find enough pity in his heart to at least let him work for his food. That would be very gracious.

The family property was a multigenerational concern (Leviticus 25:10). He had blown a third of it in short order. It would only be right for the father to have his servants chase the scoundrel off the property (Proverbs 28:7). By Jewish law, the father had a right to have him stoned (Deuteronomy 21:18-21). No wonder the younger brother so carefully prepared his plea.

*^{20b} But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. Apparently the father was carefully watching for his son to return. That would indicate to me that the father knew what the son would do with the inheritance, but also knew he would never learn his lesson any other way. **The father was willing to suffer this anguish and lose a portion of the family estate so that the son might learn that life is not simply about the pleasures of this world.** The son would also learn about the grace, love, and wisdom of the father.*

Running to meet him was a quite undignified act for a Jewish father. He would have gathered up his robe to run. Instead of the disciplinary action that society would expect, the compassionate love of the father for his son was evident to all who could witness this. At the same time, I'd be amazed if anyone working there did not have a tear in their eye seeing this display of love.

I've been in that loving embrace many times. I expect many of you have as well. And I've witnessed others being embraced by God and realizing His forgiveness, grace, and love when they knew those attributes were completely undeserved (Ephesians 2:8-9). It certainly brought tears to my eyes.

²¹ And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²² But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. The son got most of his speech out, but before he could get to the part about being a servant, the father ordered the best robe be put on him. That would be the father's robe. A ring on his hand would mean authority and status as a son restored. The fatted calf was killed to celebrate the son's restoration. It was only on a very rare

Commented [notes4]: John 8:34 (ESV)

³⁴ • Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.

Commented [notes5]: Leviticus 25:10 (ESV)

¹⁰ • And you shall consecrate the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you, when each of you shall return to his property and each of you shall return to his clan.

Commented [notes6]: Proverbs 28:7 (ESV)

⁷ • The one who keeps the law is a son with understanding, but a companion of gluttons shames his father.

Commented [notes7]: Deuteronomy 21:18-21 (ESV)

¹⁸ • "If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother, and, though they discipline him, will not listen to them, ¹⁹ • then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his city at the gate of the place where he lives, ²⁰ • and they shall say to the elders of his city, 'This our son is stubborn and rebellious; he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard.' ²¹ • Then all the men of the city shall stone him to death with stones. So you shall purge the evil from your midst, and all Israel shall hear, and fear.

Commented [notes8]: Ephesians 2:8-9 (ESV)

⁸ • For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ • not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

occasion that such a celebration took place. It was usually reserved for weddings or the visit of an extremely respected dignitary.

Now, this is just a parable, but I'd like to think in real life when this takes place we recognize God's mercy and love that bless instead of punish us. I'd like to think we learn how much wiser the heavenly Father is so that from then on we listen in humility to what He has to say. But we know that is not always the case. Most of us have to come again and again with our repentance speech, and still we find this lavish grace is poured out on us. That is what Keller meant by Prodigal God. He is a God who is extravagant in His expressions of love toward us (Ephesians 2:4-5). We are recipients of God's lavish grace. It reminds me of Stuart Townsend's song. "How deep the Father's love for us, How vast beyond all measure."

This first portion of the parable is that part which most sermons emphasize. But the story doesn't end there. Perhaps in our day, the ending is as important as the first part. *²⁵ "Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. ²⁷ And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.' ²⁸ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him,* The older brother heard the music and dancing. There was some kind of great celebration going on. Instead of just running and joining in, he stopped where he was and called a servant to ask him what was going on. The older brother acted like the younger brother feared the father would react. No way was he going to celebrate the return of his no good brother. He was angry, and in his mind he had a right to be. This reprobate brother of his was restored to his position which meant he had a right to an inheritance again. He didn't deserve restoration and a celebration; he deserved a good beating!

We see the love of the father for both sons when the father entreated the older brother. After all, **the older brother was now shaming the father by publicly protesting the father's decision**. He was refusing to honor his father. He actually became guilty of what he had accused his brother of doing, but in a very different way. While the younger brother dishonored the father with his lifestyle, the older brother dishonored him by publicly showing disrespect. In the older son's complaint, we get a hint of the condition of his heart (Jeremiah 17:9).

²⁹ but he answered his father, 'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!' Can you see that the older son was just as estranged from the father as the younger son had been? While the whole estate belonged to older son, he resented giving his father the respect society and relationship demanded. He wasn't obeying out of love, but out of duty. The herds were

Commented [notes9]: Ephesians 2:4-5 (ESV)

⁴ • But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us,
⁵ • even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—

Commented [notes10]: Jeremiah 17:9 (ESV)

⁹ • The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?

his and he could have taken goat at any time, but he resented the fact that the father hadn't specifically told him to do so. This is a situation of trying to find something to be offended over because he was angry with the father's decision (Proverbs 17:9).

Commented [notes11]: Proverbs 17:9 (ESV)

⁹ • Whoever covers an offense seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates close friends.

Perhaps most of all, he resented the fact that now his brother would have another third of what was left of the estate. This shows us that his heart was not for his family but for finances. He didn't care about his father's heart. He only wanted the property, and wasn't that the original problem with the younger brother? He resented the grace and love his father showed his brother, but he couldn't see that he was in need of that same grace.

How does this relate to the church and the problems we have today? The church will inevitably have older brother types. They grew up in the church, always did what others expected, and were model believers outwardly, but inwardly they resented those converts who were prodigals. These older brothers obey out of a sense of duty and obligation. And when they see the prodigals passionate about the Lord and His love for us, and the attention others give them, their jealousy is aroused. The older brothers are quick to point out where others don't measure up. They are the ones that wound others by their harsh words of judgment (Galatians 6:1).

Commented [notes12]: Galatians 6:1 (ESV)

¹ • Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.

This chapter begins with the Pharisees resenting Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners (Luke 15:1-2). That is why Jesus told the parable. He was telling them that they were older brother types, ready to condemn Jesus for showing the love of the Father to the repentant younger brothers.

Commented [notes13]: Luke 15:1-2 (ESV)

¹ • Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him.

² • And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

Yet again in the parable we see the patience, grace, and love of the father in listening to the older son's complaint and trying to help him see what was really important. ³¹ *And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'*" The father and older son have had the pleasure of each other's fellowship and love. The older son was in charge of it all. He could have barbecued a goat whenever he wanted.

Commented [notes14]: Luke 11:13 (ESV)

¹³ • If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

Isn't our fellowship with God enough to satisfy our soul? But on top of that, God gives us everything we need. We can ask for anything that is good for us (Luke 11:13). The father is pleading with the son to share his joy in the younger brother's restoration. Jesus is pleading with the Pharisees to share in God's joy when sinners are repentant. He is pleading with us to not be like the older brother, acting out of selfish interest or jealousy, but rather to have a heart of love for the Father and to share His joy.

The story ends without telling us what happened to the older brother. You see, the younger brother realized how estranged he was from the father and his blessings and repented. He was humbled and then exalted. The older brother was just as estranged from the father without realizing it. He was prideful but brought low (Matthew 23:12).

Commented [notes15]: Matthew 23:12 (ESV)

¹² • Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

He didn't even know he needed to repent. The story ends with the prodigal restored and exalted and the older brother angry with the father.

The Pharisees and you and I are left to end the story. Will we see how critical we can be? Will we see that if we love the Father we will rejoice in His restoration of this world's prodigals? Will we see that we too need to repent of being so critical and unloving and then accept His love and grace? We are just as needy as the younger brother. We've chosen the same ends of self-gratification while trying to look respectable (Matthew 23:25).

What if the older brother truly loved the father? What if he shared the father's heart and loved what he loved? When he saw the father watching longingly for the return of his brother, would he not go out and try to find him and urge him to return to the father's love? Even if it cost him greatly, would not the love he had for his father earnestly desire to end the pain in his father's heart? That would be the perfect older brother. The perfect older brother is Jesus (Romans 8:29)! He left His Father's heavenly home and came to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10). He came down into this world to convince us of how much our Father is grieved over our separation and how He is looking off in the distance longing to see us come home (2Peter 3:9). That's the good news of the Gospel. He is just waiting to run and embrace us and put the best robe on us and a ring on our finger, and begin the wedding feast of the Lamb (Revelation 19:7).

I'd like you to consider who you relate to in this story. Are you the younger brother, trying to find satisfaction for your soul in this world? Are you the older brother, resentful at life's difficulties because God owes you for being good? Are you refusing to come in and celebrate because you are mad at the Father for His favor on others? If you are like me you can see something of yourself in both sons. Regardless of which we happen to be, alienation from the Father is the worst place we can be. The younger brother got it right when he said, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you." That is what we need to see. We need to open our eyes to the love of God so plainly displayed on the cross, repent, and come humbly to ask to be His servant (Acts 2:38). His response will overwhelm you. His arms will embrace you. Come home! Come in and celebrate His mercy and love.

- Questions:
- 1 Have you or someone you know been hurt by the church?
 - 2 What did the younger son learn?
 - 3 What brought you to your senses?
 - 4 Was the father's compassion appropriate?
 - 5 What part of the speech was cut short?
 - 6 What was so gracious about the Father's actions?
 - 7 What did the older brother think the younger brother deserved?
 - 8 How was the older brother guilty of the same things as the younger brother?
 - 9 Who was Jesus addressing and why?

Commented [notes16]: Matthew 23:25 (ESV)

²⁵ • "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence."

Commented [notes17]: Romans 8:29 (ESV)

²⁹ • For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

Commented [notes18]: Luke 19:10 (ESV)

¹⁰ • For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

Commented [notes19]: 2 Peter 3:9 (ESV)

⁹ • The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

Commented [notes20]: Revelation 19:7 (ESV)

⁷ • Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready;

Commented [notes21]: Acts 2:38 (ESV)

³⁸ • And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

10 Who is the perfect older brother?