

The Prodigal God: Redefining Hope  
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June 12, 2010 Florida Hospital Church

For the last month we've been exploring Jesus parable of the Prodigal son. Today we're going to look at it again with the subject of "redefining hope." To begin we're going to look at the parable of the prodigal son in the Buddhist writings (Lotus Sutra 4).

Similar to Jesus parable, the story begins with a young man taking his fathers wealth and heading off to the big city where he squanders it in wild living. Many years passed by with the father looking for his son, but with no luck, he gave up his search. Many more years passed and the father again became rich, acquiring houses, servants and animals.

Some time after this, his son wandered unaware into the very town where his father then lived. He was begging as usual and looking for a job, when unbeknownst to him, he was spotted by his father. The father ordered his security officers to retrieve him, but as his son resisted, the father saw his hard-headedness still and he set him free.

The next day the father instructed two of his employees to make themselves look dirty and tired and to go find the son. When they found him and extended this invitation: "Our boss needs a janitor for his business—do you want a job?" The son thought anything was better than begging, so he took it. This began decades of hard work in which the son proved himself a good worker and soon earned the respect of his fellow employees, none of whom were aware that he was the son of the estate owner.

One day, his father became sick and, on his death bed, he revealed that there was an heir, a son who had been working for him unaware for decades, who by this time was a senior employee and had proven his ability to manage things well. To him, everything was willed because, his father said, he was now able to "appreciate and retain vast wealth."

The moral of the story is that that a person's grand hope of attaining wisdom and success is largely the result of one's efforts. What our popular culture (& the American dream) wants us to believe is that if we try hard enough we can have whatever we want and THEN we will be happy. This, my friends, is why we need to redefine hope.

If, however, you break down this parable you will see that although the son has wealth, he still lacks his father. Jesus parable, however, gives quite a different perspective. Jesus says that when the son returns home, his father falls on his neck, kisses him and welcomes him back into the family immediately.

What's the point? The point is HOPE. One parable, and too often our reality, teaches that salvation comes when we try hard enough, then we will get what we want. The other parable, however teaches something quite different. It teaches that what we want is not the point. What we want merely points to what

we really need. That's what we're going to look at today. Let's pick up Jesus parable in Luke 15:14 (read through verse 20)

As much as I love this part of the story, I want to back up and ask a question: What caused the son to even want to go home? His hunger made him think of his home. This is a theme that is woven throughout scripture because it's the story of humanity.

We, like the younger son, had a hunger that caused us to have to leave home. In the book Genesis 1-3, we learn what I'm talking about.

It says we were created in a place where there was no decay or disease. It was this way because we were with God. There we were adoring and serving God's infinite majesty. We enjoyed and reflected his infinite beauty—this was our inmost desire and true home.

Yet, we chafed under His authority. We wanted to live without God's interference. So we turned away and became alienated from him, becoming exiles for the same reason as the younger brother—hunger for something more (as if God was not enough). What did we want? We wanted independence and the ability to do whatever we wanted and here we find the human race in the year 2010 still doing whatever we want. We are ruled by our desires.

C.S. Lewis proposed (in a sermon called "The Weight of Glory" given sixty-seven years ago) that God finds our desires,

"not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."

...We could talk about this one point all day. Do you ever feel like you're too easily pleased? I know I am. My wife could tell you. Give me some ice cream and a movie and I'll be happy for a little while. If that doesn't work, just give me a few hours for a bike ride and I'll be happy for a little while too. And there are so many other things.

One of those other things is my love of the outdoors. For over a year now, I'd been talking about my need for some solo time. So, three weeks ago I went up to North Carolina for some backpacking by myself. I went to a place where I grew up hiking as a boy. As a college student I spent even more time there searching my soul and the skies for a word from God. It was a place I'd dreamed of returning to for 11 years.

On the second evening, I hiked to the second highest point in North Carolina with excitement because I felt I would find some peace there. But when I got to the top I found myself strangely dissatisfied. Has that ever happened to you? You know, you look forward to something so much and then it fails to deliver?

As I sat and thought about it for a while, I realized why I was so dissatisfied. I'd been reading through the book of John and when I came to John 6 it clicked. I was reading the story of how Jesus fed the 5000. Soon after, the people come after him looking for more bread and Jesus knows it. He knows they've come looking for bread when bread isn't what they really need. So he says in verse 35 "I am the bread of life. No one who comes to *me* will ever be hungry again..." There it hit me. The whole trip I'd been hungering for a mountain and not Jesus. That was the precise problem.

Lewis says that we sometimes attempt to go back to certain moments in the past, hoping to find the beauty we think would satisfy us. However, we don't find it. We only find the memory of it. Then we realize that the place, the person, the books or the music where we thought that beauty was located were nothing special at all. He says this is because...

"it was not in them, it only came through them...these things—the beauty, the memory of our own past—are good images of what we really desire... [And] if they are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited."

In other words, if you get hungry, it must mean that there is bread somewhere to be eaten. If you are thirsty, it must mean there is water somewhere to drink. If you long for something more, then there must be something more!

So how do we deal with these desires we worship so easily? There are two ways not to deal with desire and one way to deal with it. First, you can't blame the things you want for your discontent and second, you can't become disillusioned by your wants.

First, if you blame things for your problems, you will go from person to person or from adventure to adventure or from job to job looking for satisfaction. But at last, you will always be disappointed.

Second, if you become disillusioned, you'll repress the part of yourself that wants more than a realist. You'll tell people "oh, I felt that way when I was young too...you'll learn." If you do this, you'll feel superior to others and stifle those around you.

The first way of blaming things disappoints yourself. The second way of becoming disillusioned disappoints everyone else. There is, however, a third way to deal with our desires. This third way is the way of the Gospel which says "Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists." Essentially, our hunger points us to think of our true home. I know I don't think this way often enough.

But in Hebrews 11 we read of all the greats of faith and this is exactly what they did. Hebrews 11:16 "they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them."

Here we see a group of people who were far closer to God than any of us and the reason for that closeness was that they were “longing for a better country—a heavenly one.” The Greek word for “longing” is *oregomai* which literally means “to stretch ones self out in order to touch or grasp something.”

An interesting note on this word is that this word is only used in one other context in the New Testament. It’s in 1 Timothy 6:10 (KJV). Which says “For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.”

What the writers of scripture are doing is pointing out two opposing ways of life. One way involves stretching yourself out/straining/stressing after the things of this world. Do you ever feel like that? The other, however, is stretching out to grasp the heavenly reality that our desires point to. What we’re talking about here is so much larger than me and what I desire.

In his book, *The Prodigal God*, Tim Keller writes that Jesus didn’t come to simply come and save us from the things we want,

“but to save all of us from sin, evil, and death itself. He came to bring the human race Home. He came and experienced the exile that we deserved. He was expelled from the presence of the Father, he was thrust into the darkness, the uttermost despair of spiritual alienation—in our place. He took upon himself the full curse of human rebellion, cosmic homelessness, so that we could be welcomed into our true home.”

Things can’t bear the full weight of your soul—they are not home. The Bible says there is hope. That hope is more than I can put into words. It’s the hope of being united with Christ today and entering into the beauty of the place we were built for. Our hungers point to our real home and the feast that we are all invited to.

For now though, Monday is coming soon and the realists among us are thinking “what’s the practical use of all this talk about Home?” The answer comes from the conclusion of C.S. Lewis’s *Weight of Glory* sermon.

He reminds us that it’s possible to think only about ourselves with God and forget about our neighbors. Jesus lays this burden on all of our backs and only a person of humility can carry it. It’s with a reverence for this reality that we are to carry out our friendships, work and play. And we live with this knowledge: that our hungers point to our true home and a day will come when we will be brought into that feast.