

The Prodigal Father – Rev. Chiang Ming Shun

16 July 2017 Christ Methodist Church

Text:

Luke 15:11-32

Sermon Interrogative:

How are we to act out the role of the Prodigal Father?

Sermon Sentence:

We have to forgive generously and be gracious.

Good morning everybody!

First I must thank your pastors for inviting me here again.

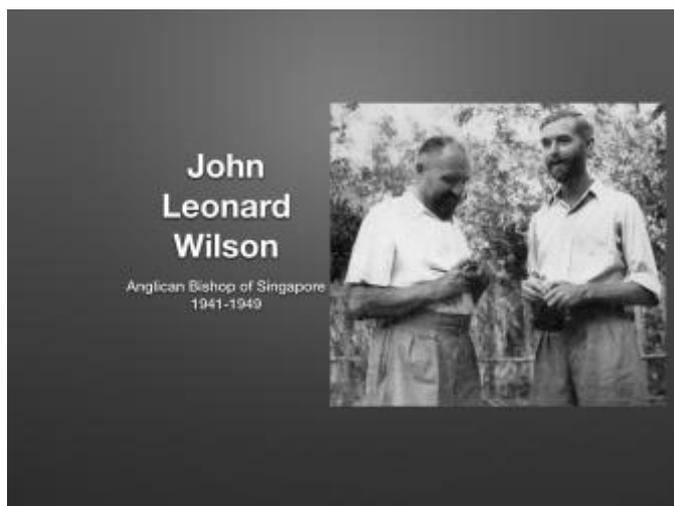
This is the first time I am preaching here at Christ Methodist Church and I bring you greetings from Trinity Theological College or TTC where I lecture in Church History.

TTC is the oldest and largest Bible college in Singapore. It was set up in 1948 after World War 2. Before that time, there was no local institution to train pastors and church workers, simply because the western missionaries here then did not allow non-Europeans to rise to church leadership.

The war changed all that. The Japanese threw all Europeans into jail and it was left to the local people to lead church services. All sermons had to be submitted in writing to be approved by the Japanese, but the sermons were written and preached by locals.

Meanwhile, the European church leaders, pastors, priests and bishops, were suffering together in Changi prison. They were treated terribly. The Anglican Bishop John Leonard Wilson was suspected of being a spy so he was tortured to make him confess.

That's him on the left.



Often he was carried back unconscious to his cell. They beat him so badly, they literally flogged all the skin off his thighs.

On one occasion, 7 Japanese soldiers took turns to whip him. They asked him why he didn't curse them. He said it was because he was a follower of Jesus who taught us to love one another. They beat him for 8 months. At that time, Bishop John couldn't forgive the Japanese because when he saw their hard, cruel faces, he knew they were obviously enjoying torturing him.

But while these Europeans were suffering in prison, they realised that there was little differentiating them. So they determined to present a united front when they were released. They discussed coming together in a federation of churches, and that became the National Council of Churches of Singapore.

They also talked about setting up the first Bible college in Singapore, and so after the war the Methodists, the Anglicans, the Presbyterians and the Lutherans came together and established Trinity Theological College or TTC.

The founding Principal of TTC was a Methodist pastor, Hobart Amstutz, who later became the Methodist Bishop in Singapore.



There is a flyer that tells you more about what is going on in TTC these days. I invite you to also visit our website.



So I have been a Methodist pastor for 17 years now, but a few years ago I was appointed to be a lecturer at TTC. That is one way that our Conference, Trinity Annual Conference, supports TTC: by sending Methodist pastors to teach there.

Going back to TTC was a sort of homecoming for me, since I was a graduate of TTC.

In fact, I will tell you that initially I was a little embarrassed to be a lecturer at TTC because I wasn't a very good student there.

In those days of old when TTC was at Mount Sophia we had a Friday evening service, after the non-air-conditioned chapel had soaked up the afternoon sun.

I was seated four rows from the front and a British missionary had been invited to speak.

As it was a warm Friday evening, I fell asleep.

Unfortunately as I fell asleep, I also fell off the pew.

Fortunately, on the way down, I crashed into the lap of my classmate Ernest, seated beside me.

That woke him up.

And he was quick enough to grab me before I rolled onto the floor.

He pulled me upright, and we sat in innocent silence for a while.

Then I leaned over to him, and whispered, "Did anybody see that?"

Ernest had a quick look behind.

And he whispered back, "Everybody behind has a big smile."

After the service, my church history lecturer came up to me.

"So Ming Shun", he said, "Were you slain by the Spirit?"

That taught me two things: first, church history lecturers are cool jokers, and second, in the college chapel always sit at the back.

Today we look at another homecoming, the parable of the prodigal son, a familiar parable known to many of us, but perhaps misinterpreted by most. A parable commonly known as the parable of the Prodigal Son.

Just so everybody is clear, the word 'prodigal' means extravagantly generous.

Here is the story in Luke 15:11-32

¹¹ And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. ¹³ Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. ¹⁴ And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

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.” ²⁰ And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. 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. ²³ And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. ²⁴ For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.

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, 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!’

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.’”

[let us pray]

Let me start by pointing out some important aspects of the story. First, the younger son demanded his inheritance. He demanded the father split up and divide everything. Because he is the younger son, his share would be one-third, according to ancient custom. The elder brother gets 2 shares, or two-thirds in this case.

Now I want to ask you, how would you react if your child came up to you and asked for one-third of your property?

Let me give you an example from the 20th century.

Frank Mars and his son Forrest

In the 1930s, Frank Mars had a company that made Snickers and Milky Way chocolate bars. One day his son Forrest Mars demanded a share of the business because he wanted to expand the business abroad.

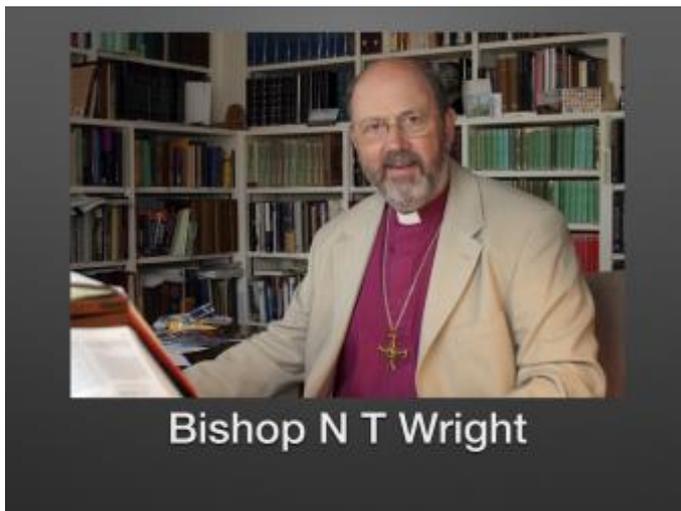
What did Frank Mars do? Frank got so angry, he threw his son out. Forrest left America, and went over to Switzerland to learn how to make chocolate with Nestle company. Later on Forrest moved to England and started his own company, making Mars Bars and M&Ms.

But Frank never forgave his son. In Frank's will, he left nothing to his son Forrest, but gave 50% of the company to his wife Ethel.

Frank Mars refused to divide his property for his son.

How about in Jesus' time?

According to my favourite theologian NT Wright



whose comments on this story were most helpful to me, in the Middle Eastern context of this parable, scholars know of only two ancient examples which have been recorded, of sons asking their fathers for their inheritance.

Both instances ended in death. In the first case, the father was so shocked he had a heart attack and died.

In the second case, the father was so angry he beat his son to death.

Why? Because for the younger son to ask for his share of the inheritance was unthinkable. It is the equivalent of saying to his father, "I wish you were dead."

Because the property is only divided when the father is dead.

In Jesus' story, the father should have beaten the son, or thrown him out. Instead he agrees to his son's request. Jesus' audience would have been shocked.

So in this story, the father divided up his property between his two sons. In other words, he has nothing left. He gave the younger son one-third, and the rest went to the elder son. You can't give to one son, without giving to the other. Is that true? The father is left with nothing.

The younger son of course squandered his share and ended up doing the job so far low that it was nearly impossible to go lower for a Jew, feeding pigs for a gentile master.

Remember, the Jewish food laws are the same as the Muslim food laws. Pigs are not kosher to Jews, or halal to Muslims.

But the younger son managed to sink even further in disgrace. He had the nerve to return home.

At least if he was far away, the family could spin some story about him.

But when he came back, broke and broken, he threatened to disgrace the family in front of the whole village.

When we read that the son came to his senses, it doesn't necessarily mean repentance.

It means the son had an idea. This was what went through his mind:

Instead of thinking, I have hurt my father, I will go back and see what I can do to make him feel better, the son thinks instead, "How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger!"

This is a thought prompted not by regret for a wasteful life, not out of love for the father, but motivated simply by hunger.

So the son devised a speech, carefully calculated to win back the father.

And the son returned home.

Bishop NT Wright says that Jesus' audience would have been utterly shocked by what the father did next.

What did the father do? The father saw the son approaching far off and he ran to greet his useless son.

In the Middle East, as in parts of Asia, senior members of families do not run, it is not dignified.

They certainly do not run to greet someone like the younger son.

What does the son say now that the Father has welcomed him back? He should say "Thank you", but in this story the son never said thank you. He launched into his prepared speech.

Even as the son tried to deliver his memorised speech, before he could finish, the father called for the best robe, a ring, shoes and the fatted calf.

Now there are many questions people have asked about this ending.

Is the younger son really repentant? Why didn't he seek out his elder brother, who is not at the party? Why didn't he stay close with the father and go talk to the elder brother when he arrived? All we know is that the younger son went to the party where he no doubt enjoyed himself.

Now the elder son knew nothing about the party, because he has to ask about it. It seems the father was so excited he forgot tell the elder son. Maybe the elder son was working out in the fields all day.

The elder son had to ask a servant what was going on, before he found out that his brother had come home and the father had killed the fatted calf.

Notice that the servant did not mention the ring and the robe and the shoes. Why? Whose fatted calf was that, and whose ring and robe and shoes? They were the elder son's, because the father had divided up his property.

In the last part of the story, the father and the elder son remain outside, arguing. As with most parables of Jesus, there is no ending.

Jesus' parables are cliff-hangers. Without endings, there are many possibilities.

I have read six different possible endings by Douglas Adams at the Pacific School of Religion at Berkeley, California



In one ending, the father returns to the party and the elder son lingers outside. Later, when most of the guests are gone, the younger son drunkenly staggers outside, where the elder son leaps from the shadows and strikes him dead.

In the second ending, the older son relents and goes to the party with the father, but when he greets the younger brother, he sees the family ring on his finger and in a rage cuts off the younger son's hand and has the father committed into a mental hospital for being as he gave away property not his own.

In a third ending, the younger son runs away with the ring, best robe, and other property and, after losing it all, comes home again. He repeats this pattern over and over again, and is still living with his parents in his old age.

In another ending, the elder son comes into the party and the brothers are reconciled.

In yet another ending, the brothers continue to live at home but are unreconciled.

In the sixth ending, the father gets sick of both sons, claims back what is left of the property and goes off to try his luck at the casinos in Las Vegas.

Most people focus on the younger son and the need for repentance. But are we looking at the right thing?

There is this story of a husband whose wife had a baby, and the husband was always too busy at work to return home and help care for the baby. He is just out making money.

But one night he comes back and the baby is asleep, so the father stands and just stares at the baby in the crib. The wife walks by and she is just so happy that the husband is finally taking an interest in the baby, and she goes up and hugs the husband. And the husband whispers in wonder, "How could anybody produce such a beautiful crib for only \$28.95?"

Are we looking at the right thing, the baby or the crib?

The story is not about the younger son. The son is not prodigal. Prodigal as I said means extravagantly generous. The son is a fool, but the real thrust of the story is on the love of the father. The father is the real prodigal, the one who is really overly generous. What is this parable really about?

Any one in Jesus' audience listening to him would have realised that this parable is about the story of Israel. It echoes the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. It is all about exile and restoration.

Exile and Restoration

Israel was conquered by Assyria and Babylon over 2,500 years ago.

Israel conquered by Assyrians and Babylonians

The Israelites were taken off as slaves to distant pagan lands.

When the Babylonian empire finally fell to the Persians, the Persians allowed the Israelites to return home from exile, over four hundred years before the birth of Jesus.

Persians allowed Israelites to return home

But in Jesus' day, many if not most Jews regarded their exile as still continuing. The people had certainly returned home to the Promised Land, but the great restoration prophecies in the Old Testament had not yet come true.

Israel had not been restored as a nation.

First, the Greeks occupied Israel. Then in Jesus' day, the Greeks were replaced by a Roman occupation army. Israel was ruled by a brutal Roman governor.

So the Israelites felt like they were still in exile.

The Israelites had a wonderful Temple in Jerusalem, but before the exile, you could tell when God was in the holy of Holies because His presence, the Shekinah glory of God, filled the temple like smoke.

2 Chronicles 5:14 says clearly, "the house of the Lord, was filled with a cloud, ¹⁴so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of God."

The people knew when God was present.

In Jesus' time, after the exile, that presence was no longer seen in the Temple.

We know now God had come down as a man, but no one recognised Him then, not yet.

So the Israelites thought that God had not returned to His Temple. They saw Israel as still being oppressed by foreign overlords.

And people were still waiting for God's redemption, they were still in spiritual exile.

However, the early Christians were behaving as though God had come. Not just that God had returned to the temple, but that the people had returned from exile.

Why?

Because in Jesus, God had returned to His Temple. He entered the Jerusalem in triumph, He cleansed the Temple, threw out the moneylenders and all who sold and bought things there.



Jesus ended our spiritual exile

Jesus' presence meant that our spiritual exile was over. Jesus welcomed everyone, giving forgiveness, restoration.

And God gave a new covenant, a new testament. There was to be a new Israel, made up of those who believe in Jesus.

What this whole story therefore is saying is that Israel could sin, and sin so badly to end up feeding pigs for a pagan master, but God did not stop loving His people. We can turn away from God, but He will keep loving us.

When God's people decide to return home, to come back to God, there is surprisingly generous, prodigal welcome waiting for all of us.

And Jesus acted out this welcome. His eating with sinners, his celebration meals, even on the Sabbath, they are like the Father's celebration party in this story. God celebrates the return of his people.

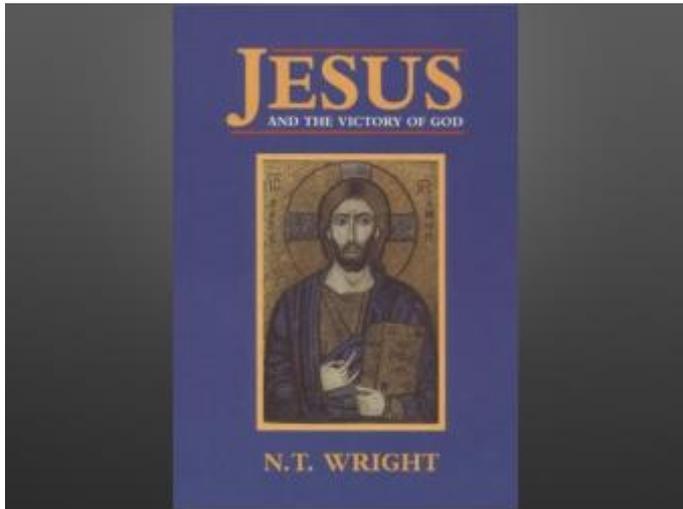


God celebrates the return of His people

When Jesus welcomes sinners, when he gathers up people in the new Israel, it is God doing it, welcoming us into eternal life, as long as we accept the welcome of Jesus.

So in Jesus' entire ministry, we see God entering Jerusalem, returning to His temple, and removing the veil between God and His people.

If you want to read more about this, NT Wright has a book called *Jesus and the Victory of God*, published 20 years ago. It is only 760 pages, volume 1.



What can we take away from this story?

This story asks us to play a role in God's new covenant.

What role is this? Are we to be like the younger son or the elder son?

No, the call of the entire New Testament is to be like the Father. We are to be like our Father.



And so, like the father in this story, and our Father in heaven, we are to do two things:

- 1 Forgive generously as our Father forgives

**Forgive generously as
our Father forgives**

2 Be gracious as our Father is gracious

**Be gracious as
our Father is gracious**

Forgive generously.

**Forgive generously as
our Father forgives**

Ernest Hemingway in his book *Capital of the World*, writes of life in Spain before World War II. He tells the story of a young man named Paco, which is a common Spanish name.

Paco fell out with his father and left home. After a while, Paco's father put a short notice in the Madrid daily newspaper which read simply, "Paco, all is forgiven. Meet me at the steps to this newspaper office at noon on Friday. Your loving Father."

Hemingway wrote that when the father turned up at the newspaper office on Friday, there were 600 men named Paco waiting for him.

People need forgiveness. But more than that, we need to forgive. I had this terrible woman where I worked years ago who made life hell for me. I used to dream of ways to get revenge. But I realised it made no difference to her whether I forgave her or not, but it was eating me up inside.

As the Americans say, she got to live in my head, rent-free.

I had to learn to forgive, let go of my anger and bitterness, and move on. Forgive all generously.

Do we not pray this, when we ask God to forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us?

Secondly, we are to be gracious as God is gracious.



**Be gracious as
our Father is gracious**

There is this story of a husband and wife who couldn't get along. They were always arguing. And so one day they decided to try something the wife proposed. Every day, they would write down one thing about the other that irritated them, and put it into a box. After one month they would exchange boxes and try to change. One month later, they sat down at the table and exchanged boxes.

The husband opened his box. He took out the slips of paper and learnt that he never put down the toilet seat after using the toilet, he threw his clothes all over the place, he never washed up the dishes, and he mixed the whites with the colours in the washing machine. And the husband noted everything and resolved to be better.

Then the wife opened her box and found that the husband had written the same thing on every slip of paper. Each slip of paper read, "I love you."

When I read out this story to my wife, she asked, "Why can't it be the other way?"

I said no, husbands are the best. It's okay, my wife is not here today.

We are to be gracious as our Father is gracious. Treat others as we would want to be treated. We want others to be good to us, but we are not always gracious, even in church.

In many churches, there are carpark problems. I once had to deal with a complaint that not only was there an argument between a church member and a visitor in the carpark, after the argument the church member scratched the visitor's car.

And there is this church in town where the tai tais refuse to worship with their domestic helpers. Must go to a different service.

There is a hymn we sing that in Christ there is no east or west. But we still have these divisions.

I hope we are different. I hope we are gracious to all, in church and outside of church.

Because God calls us to love all. We are all sinners, and we are all still welcome to enter the kingdom of heaven.

If you do not act out God's gracious welcome, who is going to do it? God gives us grace to love all, even those who hate us.

This week, I would like you to think of one person who has wronged you, and forgive without that person asking for it. In today's parable, the son neither asks for forgiveness nor says thank you, but the father lavishes him with love and forgiveness. Be like the father.

Also, I would like you practice graciousness and welcome one person to this church. Either greet a newcomer and make that person feel welcome and part of a family, or bring someone to church yourself. Or do something that is overly gracious.

I told you about Bishop John Leonard Wilson earlier. There is a good ending to that story.

After the war, he had the great joy of confirming one of his torturers.

This is how he described it, "One of these men who was allowed to march up from the prison to the cathedral, as a prisoner, to come for baptism, was one of those who had stood with a rope in his hand, threatening and sadistic I have seldom seen so great a change in a man. He looked gentle and peaceful. His face was completely changed by the power of Christ."

What went through Bishop John Wilson's mind when his former torturer stood before him was not hatred or anger.

It was peace and satisfaction, an acceptance that God extends forgiveness and grace to even the most brutal.

Forgive generously as our Father forgives.



**Forgive generously as
our Father forgives**

Be gracious as our Father is gracious.



**Be gracious as
our Father is gracious**

Now I know it's not easy. But we can try. Because no matter how difficult it is to be forgiving and gracious, those who are the children of God are still called to be like our extravagantly forgiving and loving Father.