

The Parables of Jesus: The Fireproof Bridge
By Jason Huff
March 28, 2021
Psalm 107: 1-21; Ephesians 2:1-10; Luke 15:11-32

Our final Scripture reading today is Luke 15:11-32. Listen now to God's holy, sacred, and perfect Word. "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. 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. 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.' So he got up and went to his father. 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. The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 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.' So they began to celebrate. 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.'"

The phrase "burning your bridges" is so common that we don't stop to wonder about where it comes from. It comes from the very literal practice in the ancient Roman world of burning a bridge after an army crossed it so that there would be no deserters. The only way left was forward towards the enemy. A famous variation on this was the practice of burning ships. In 1519, Hernan Cortez was a conquistador for Spain, and when he and his men arrived in Aztec lands, he ordered the ships burned so that they couldn't return – it was conquer or perish.

When we use the phrase, "burning your bridges," we usually mean it in a metaphorical sense. When you tell your awful boss what you really think of him as you quit, that's burning a bridge. When you launch into a tirade where you list everything bad a friend has done to you since the second grade, that's burning a bridge. Sometimes it's a good practice; burning bridges is important when we are tempted to go back to something awful that still has a hold on us for some reason. But the advice not to burn our bridges is usually wise. We typically regret it.

Today's passage is one that most of us have heard. It is possibly the most famous of Jesus' parables, maybe only matched by the parable of the Good Samaritan. It is a parable about burnt bridges: about our expectations of God and our rejections of God and ultimately about God's redeeming love being more powerful than any bridges we think we've burned. Also within this parable is the reason that Jesus came and why this week is Holy Week – when Jesus died and was resurrected on the third day. Because Jesus Himself is the fireproof bridge.

So let's start with some context here. The passage starts with the phrase, "Jesus continued." This was actually His third parable about a similar theme. Jesus was getting heat from the Pharisees and scribes because Jesus welcomed tax collectors and known sinners to listen to Him and even to eat with Him. In ancient Israelite culture, eating with someone was a sign of kinship and favor. To eat with a sinner was seen by the religious people as condoning what they had done. The scribes and Pharisees were honestly disgusted to be at the same table with those who they felt were beneath them spiritually.

Jesus used three different parables to illustrate that through Him, God was reaching out to the lost – those who had not made the mark, who had failed in following the Law, who were in fact sinners. (Keep in mind that Jesus had already said that to get into God's Kingdom, you had to be more righteous than the scribes and Pharisees – He had already pointed out that no one was good enough to earn God's favor, that all were in some way lost.) But in each parable, Jesus showed how in common situations, such as a woman who'd lost one of her ten coins or a shepherd who'd lost one of a hundred sheep, there was great rejoicing over finding the one that had gone missing. The emphasis was on finding the lost.

The story starts with the younger son making a request of his father. "Father, give me my share of the estate." Now to our ears, this doesn't sound all that unreasonable. Parents nowadays often help pay for college, help their kids with loans to get started. Some parents get their kids a car or help with car payments at sweet sixteen or graduation. We love our kids; we want to help them; in today's economy, we know they're going to need all the help they can get.

But this isn't how it sounds to our ears. A father's estate was his legacy to his children. Traditionally – not by biblical law but by custom stretching at least as far back as the time of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – the eldest son got a double portion of the estate. And a father didn't split up his estate until he was on his deathbed. Isaac accidentally gives his blessing to Jacob instead of Esau because he's so old, he's lost his sight and, even though he knows the voices of his sons, he gets tricked into giving Jacob the blessing. Jacob gives his last words of blessing to his sons, and then he dies.

For a son to ask his father for his portion of the estate is not like asking for a co-signer on a car note or asking for an interest-free loan. He is saying to his father, "You are dead to me. I want to cash out." This is Bridge Burning 101. There is no better way to light that thing on fire than to do what this kid did. (He's a little punk is what he is!) The whole reason that you don't split up your estate early is that you never know what might happen. When famine hits, when times get hard – and note in the story that this is what exactly happens – having split up the estate endangers all the family that's left, because who knows if they would need that money? It seems the father knew this was the only way forward – to give him the money.

And to prove the point, the younger son immediately hits the road – packs his bags, piles up the caravan with his new-found wealth, and heads off as far as his cart will take him. He's leaving behind everything...he feels no responsibility for the estate he's sold off, no guilt that he's left behind his family 1/3rd poorer. He's putting as much distance as he can between them.

And it's not like he's heading out because his father was harsh with him or because he'd had a difficult life. He's not even leaving to find his way in the world and establish himself as his own man. He goes out to party. He spends his money on wine, women, and song – or as most of us would think of it, sex, drugs, and rock and roll. He's the wild child, buying everyone a shot at the bar, chatting up every pretty girl he meets, burning through money like he just burned through the bridges with his family. No saving, no investing, no planning for the future...just a third of what his father built over the course of a lifetime, gone, spent on everything his heart desires.

But as everyone knows, the money only lasts so long. When you're only famous for having money, you lose your friends when the money runs out. Now he's far from home, nobody he knows, no one to look out for him, and famine strikes. Everyone's tightening their belts and their wallets. The younger son suddenly has nothing – no place to sleep, no food for his belly, not any sort of reasonable job. It gets so bad that he hires himself to be a pig handler. This would have shocked Jesus' audience; while there were other unclean animals, none were as reviled in Jewish culture as the pig. Some would have thought he was getting his just reward.

This guy has sunk as low as he could go, it would seem. Except for the fact that he can't even eat the leftover carob pods the pigs eat. Carob pods, believe it or not, are used in dog treats today. During the Spanish Civil War and World War I and II, they kept a lot of people in Spain alive when there was nothing else to eat. They're a natural source of sugar, they have up to 50% sugar content – but that means that when you eat them, they make you feel even hungrier. No one would ever intentionally eat them in a culture that had limited food supplies unless they absolutely had to, because you'd never feel full on them until you got sick.

Finally, after who knows how long spending through money, then working as a pig feeder, longing for any sort of life at all, he remembers home. He comes to his senses – he recognizes what a fool he's been. And his first thought is, "Dad's hired workers have plenty of food – that's my only hope!" Now he's still self-centered; his whole internal dialogue is about how he's going to try and rebuild that burnt bridge – to use another metaphor, to mend fences with his father.

He realizes it's going to take a lot. He plans to confess his sin, and that what he did was not just a youthful mistake but an offense both against his father and God. He is willing to forgo the title son; he doesn't deserve it. He just wants to be like a hired man. And yet, all these things might not bring him back into his father's good graces. What the young man did was a betrayal at a base level. He is empty-handed; he has nothing to show for all he was given. From a human point of view, the father owes him nothing. The father could refuse and it would be good riddance. The reality is, the young man regrets his situation more than he truly wants to return home. His motives are mixed. Whatever the father does is understandable.

But when he heads home, something incredible happens. The father spots his son far off in the distance. And when the father sees him, he feels compassion for him. Not anger at the son's painful words, not rage about his lost fortunes, not disgust at the son's condition, just love. And he does the unthinkable – he runs to the son, throws his arms around him, and kisses him. This just wasn't done in the ancient Near East. Men were dignified; they wore long robes. To do this would have been an unspeakable embarrassment. But the father doesn't care how it looks. His son is home, and however it looks to the world doesn't matter.

The father seems not even to hear his son's words. Yes, he's remorseful, but he's home! Do whatever we can to show him our affection. Bring him the best of what I have to wear. Kill the best cow we've gotten ready for a special occasion – because this is it! My son was dead and is now alive! No talk of the shame or the sin. The son is loved. He turned around and came home. Let's celebrate!

Friends, this is the gospel. The good news is that our heavenly Father welcomes home all who turn from sin and come to Him. There is no fear that we will be rejected or unloved. There is no fear that He will turn to us and say, "You traveled too far down the road." None who truly repent and return will ever be forsaken.

And what we celebrate at Easter time is the bridge God laid for us in the form of Jesus. Back when Adam and Eve sinned and ever since, we've all been burning our bridges with God. And yet, God sent His Son to be the bridge back for us. Jesus gave His life so that all who God draws to Himself will be redeemed and made whole. When God looks upon us, He does not see our sin. Jesus had paid the debt for it. When God looks upon us, He does not view all our callousness and wickedness, all our disobedience. He just has love for us.

And Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners because He came to save the least, the last, and the lost. He wanted them to know that the bridge they burned with God had been replaced by Him, their long-awaited Messiah, who would bridge the gap between us and God's eternal Kingdom. The gospel message is not, "Be good." It is, "I was good for you; now follow me back across the bridge I have created to eternal life."

Now the older son finally enters the picture. And the older son is hot. He's mad. When he hears about the celebrations for his younger brother, he is fit to be tied. He refuses to go. He wants nothing to do with his brother or his father, for that matter. His father pleads with him to go in, but he refuses. What's most striking is that the older brother states the same contempt for his father that the younger brother showed in his actions!

The older brother uses all sorts of extremes to show just how angry he is. "Look here!," he starts off. He does, very literally, say he's been slaving for his father all these years. When he says his father has never even given him a young goat for a celebration with his friends, he's in essence saying that his father has given him nothing. And while the passage isn't all that clear exactly what his immoral living looked like, the brother is more than happy to supply the details of what kind of women his dad's money was spent on. He's furious, but moreover, his disrespect for his father is clear. He may have obeyed his father, but perhaps even more estranged from him. He needs his father's forgiveness as much as the younger son does.

But the father is not upset with him; he talks to him respectfully and lovingly. Now the entire estate belongs to the older brother. And unlike his younger sibling, he's always had his dad's loving support. But to not celebrate his brother's homecoming is to miss out on the most important thing – your brother has been given back to us. He was dead and now he's alive; he's lost and now he's found. How can we keep from celebrating?

Now let's be honest – we all need grace. We all need the sacrifice of Jesus to save us and cover our sins. But some of us here today have been following Jesus for a long time. We've lived as disciples. We've given our lives over to Him. We've sacrificed and done what God has asked of us. And the party usually seems to be more about getting people to come to faith than to celebrate those who've always been a part of the church. Nobody gives a party for old Mabel who's been feeding lunches to the new believer's class for the last sixty years. We rarely stop to thank our musicians or our elders or the deacons who go visiting or make sure no one's going hungry. The emphasis is usually on how we can reach the stranger, the newcomer, and the person who's in need.

That can be tough. In fact, one of the ways churches often die is when the members want church to be about them. They stop inviting strangers and stop helping the community and retreat inside. It can happen to any church at any time. And part of it is the same thing that bugged the older brother. I've been in this for a long time, God. Why can't the music reflect my tastes? Why can't the sermon be about making me feel good? I've been here a long time; why should I continue to give and give and let others take and take?

When that happens, we need a change of heart. Because while we may have become older brothers who have long been followers of Jesus, we were born prodigals. We were born with burnt bridges. We may think we've had our acts together a long time, but it's only by the grace of God. The older brother didn't earn his inheritance any more than the younger brother did. It's all given to us solely by the good pleasure of the Lord. We can rejoice when anyone comes to faith, when anyone gives their life over to Christ, because we've been there too. As Isaiah 53 reminds us, speaking about us and about Jesus, "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

Friends, as we come to Palm Sunday, we remember how Jesus was welcomed into Jerusalem as the long-awaited Savior. They expected Him to vanquish their enemies and lead them to victory. And that's exactly what He did – not with a sword and a spear but with His body and blood and cross. He vanquished our real enemy of sin and death; He leads us to victory over the bridge of His cross and into eternal life.

As we head towards Good Friday and then Easter shortly beyond, may we remember: God pursues us over our burned bridges. He comes to rescue us from danger, even when we've foolishly gone astray. We can find hope in the gift of eternal life Jesus promises all of us who come to Him. May we rejoice when anyone comes to faith in Jesus, and may we rejoice in the loving Father who, despite our former sins, runs to greet us and welcomes us home.