

**The Faith of Jesus in a Pluralistic World**  
**Part 8: The Parable of the Two Lost Sons**  
by Rev. Dr. Eric Elnes  
August 25, 2019

Scripture: Genesis 1:26-27; Luke 15:11-31  
Excerpts from the Qur'an (2:28, 7:11, 15:29, 17:61, 18:50, 20:116, 28:71)

## **I. Focusing our Lens**

When we were considering the offer to become the Christian partner of the Tri-Faith Initiative, someone asked me what the greatest benefit to Countryside would be. I said, "The average Countryside member will become 20% more Christian."

Of course, you can't really calculate faith by percentage. What I really meant was that our Christian walk would grow deeper. More confident and effective. More joyfully engaged.

I held this belief, which I have already seen borne out, because the three major Abrahamic faiths are like three children of the same parent. When the three children actually get along and play together, rather than fighting about who-did-what-to-whom or which child the parent "loves best," then each child gains strength and vitality through the family relationship. The children learn from each other. They protect one another. They encourage each other. And they learn more about their parent through the observations of their siblings.

As a Christian, I understand Jesus better through my relationship with Jews and Muslims. I also appreciate Jesus more than ever. Jesus's teachings and parables resonate on deeper levels and help me apply them to wider areas of my daily life when I consider them in relationship to the teachings of Judaism and Islam.

Case in point: The Parable of the Lost, or "Prodigal," Son. This is one of Jesus's most famous parables. It is so familiar that it is easy to fall into the trap of thinking we know everything the parable has to teach us. Yet when we set down the familiar Christian lens through which we read this parable and put on Jewish or Muslim lenses, we discover that this simple little story operates on all kinds of levels that we may never have noticed.

Let's remind ourselves of the basic parable, first:

A father has two sons. One day the younger son asks the father to give him his share of the property he can expect to inherit when the father dies. The request is a little unusual since the father is still alive – and is a bit like saying, "Can we just pretend you're dead already so I can get my stuff and leave?"

The father complies and a few days later the youngest son takes off with his inheritance where he squanders his property "in dissolute living." There is a severe famine. The son begins to starve. So, he hires himself out to one of the citizens of the country who sends him out to feed

the pigs. Feeding pigs is a Jewish way of saying that the kid has hit rock bottom, given that even touching a pig is considered an “abomination” in the Book of Leviticus.

Just when he thinks he can't get any lower than this, the Prodigal realizes that even the pigs are eating “higher on the hog” so-to-speak than he is. It is then that he realizes that it would be better to return home and live as a servant in his father's household than remain where he is. He determines to set out for home, confess to his father that he has sinned both against heaven and his father, and beg for a job as one of his household servants.

His father spots him while he is still far off, suggesting that the father has been looking out at the horizon each day hoping against hope for his son's return. Filled with compassion, he runs to his son, puts his arms around him and kisses him. The son makes his confession but the father will have none of it. He calls to his servants to dress his son in his best robe, put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Then he tells other servants to kill the choicest calf and start the barbeque. “For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!”

Once the party is in full swing, the Prodigal's brother comes in from working the fields and hears the music and dancing. When he finds out why everyone is so happy, he becomes indignant. His father comes outside and pleads with him to come inside and join the party, but the Elder Brother erupts with pent up frustration and anger. “Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But *when this son of yours* came back (notice that he doesn't even refer to him as a brother) who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!”

The father responds compassionately. “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because *this brother of yours* was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.”

Over the years, I have led many a Bible study on this parable. While people are touched by the father's compassion, many people end up siding with the Elder Brother over the Prodigal. “How can the father know he's not being played by the Prodigal?” many ask. They also point out that while the robe, the ring, the sandals, and the fatted calf are technically the property of the father, what the father is actually doing by giving the Prodigal these things is spending down the inheritance that would have gone to the Elder Brother! So, not only has the Elder Brother had to shoulder more than his share of the work while the Prodigal was squandering his inheritance, but the Elder Brother's own inheritance is now being squandered by his father on a son who probably hasn't really repented and will just leave again after he's enjoyed his father's largesse. At least, this is how the Elder Brother probably perceived it.

“This parable is not good news,” people say. “Does Jesus really want us to act like the father when we're faced with a similar situation?”

Of course, we are faced with this kind of situation all the time – perhaps not directly with a family member, but with members of society. Some people in our society squander what resources they have in dissolute living and then expect the rest of us to pick up the bill for their care. They may not have even repented like the Prodigal did (or pretended to do) or asked to

work for their keep, but we're still stuck with the bill. What many believe Jesus's parable does is offer support for growing a giant welfare state where the least responsible citizens exist in a parasitic relationship with those who have worked hard and been responsible all along.

Personally, I share some of these concerns. It's especially easy for a minister to become an Elder Brother, don't you know? That's because a minister works "for God." So, given the choice between going out and having fun and working "for God" ... how can we say "no" to God? Countless are the invitations I've turned down to have fun with friends on Saturday nights because I'm burning the midnight oil preparing for Sunday. I'm up at the crack of dawn on Sunday while my partying friends are sleeping in. They may never show up to hear the fruits of my labors. And, like you, I'm aware of the fact that a sizeable portion of the income you and I make from our hard work goes to taxes, at least some of which are spent taking care of people who have been less responsible; who aren't even asked to repent or vow to change their ways in order to receive assistance. How is this parable even remotely fair to those of us Elder Brothers?

There is a story in the Qur'an that helps me see this parable a little differently when I get worked up over the apparent unfairness of it all. It's a story, which some of you have heard already: the story of the fall of Satan, who is called Iblis in the Qur'an.

Bits and pieces of the story are told in seven different places in the Qur'an. Can you tell already that it's considered vitally important? According to the story, when God created human beings, God created us imperfect from the start. There is no story of "The Fall" of Adam and Eve as there is in our Bible. We came into being in a "fallen" state from the beginning. Much to the surprise of the heavenly beings, however, God commanded the host of heaven to bow down to us. (Not to God, but to *us*!)

At first, the angels object. They see our flaws clearly. "They will commit evil," the angels exclaim, "even murder!" In response, God observes, "I know things that you do not." This stops them cold. While they can see no reason to bow down to humanity using their own wisdom, they respect God's wisdom and choice to create us. Therefore, they submit themselves to God and bow to us.

The only one who does not bow is Iblis. Iblis is not an angel in the Qur'an, but a jinni. (Jinni is where we get the term Genie.) According to the Qur'an, the difference between an angel and a jinni is that angels have no free will. Angels are almost like robots. They only ever comply with God's commands. Jinn, however, are like us in that they have free will. Only, in contrast to us humans, who were created from clay, jinn are made of "smokeless fire" – in other words, far superior material.

Iblis reminds God of this fact. How could he, as a higher-order being of superior power and perfection, ever bow to lowly, flawed humanity? God may "know things that he does not" but Iblis could not bring himself to honor what he did not understand. Thus, he was kicked out of heaven.

Doesn't this story seem a bit unfair to Iblis? Imagine God asking you to bow down to humanity – not just the "saints" among us but the "sinners," too: the liars and cheats, the lowlifes and spendthrifts, the murderers and dictators. The Democrats and Republicans! And the Prodigals ...

Of course, if you've read the Qur'an, you know that God is hardly soft on sin. Countless are the reminders that those who sin literally will have hell to pay if they don't change their hearts. All of us, in fact – even those bound for heaven in the end – are warned that we will likely get at least a small taste of hell before we move on to Paradise. Thus, for many, hell is kind of a Muslim version of Purgatory. So, one thing we can absolutely know about the story of Iblis's fall is that when God asked the hosts of heaven to bow down to us, God was not asking them to honor our sinfulness in any way.

What then was God's purpose? Why did Iblis get kicked out just for refusing to bow down to us sinners? The key to understanding the story is God's observation that "I know things that you do not."

God wasn't asking the angels to bow down to *our sinfulness*. Rather, God was effectively asking them to acknowledge and bow down to *God's authority and perfection* – not just the perfection that they could understand but the perfection they could not.

In essence, the heavenly host was challenged to submit to that part of God that remained a mystery to them. In bowing down to us, they were actually acknowledging that God is greater than the sum total of their understanding and they were bowing to God's mystery.

What this story teaches us is that the root of all evil is self-righteous indignation. It is the deeply held conviction that we are superior to someone else – even if our conviction is entirely accurate, as Iblis's was. When our sense of superiority, real or perceived, leads us to dishonor that which God has created – and desires for us to honor – we and Iblis are one.

Self-righteous indignation is what led Cain to kill Abel. Self-righteous indignation is what led the crowd in Jesus's day to seek to stone the woman caught in adultery. (John 8:7)

Self-righteous indignation is what led the Pharisees in Jesus's day to criticize Jesus for hanging out with the "prostitutes, tax collectors, and sinners." Self-righteous indignation is what leads any of us to act without compassion towards those who are spiritually sick. Ultimately, self-righteous indignation is what pits our righteousness against God's righteousness. In any contest between our righteousness and that of God, guess who wins?

When it comes down to it, self-righteous indignation is poison. Too much of it may kill us physically and certainly kills us spiritually. Part of what makes it so lethal is that, once it's in our system, it is terribly hard to remove.

While I rarely preach directly on political issues, it probably comes as little surprise to you that I'm not the greatest fan of our current president. From the moment he was elected, I began to feel wave after wave of poisonous self-righteous indignation mounting up within me. I knew then that if this poison continued to build, I was in for trouble. So, every day, I prayed for our president. I would not pray for his success, but for his healing. I would not stop praying each day until I could feel some authentic sense of compassion for him. It took me six long months of daily prayer to work enough poison out of my system that my self-righteous indignation wouldn't control me anymore.

Our society is swimming in a sea of poison right now. So much so that I have no idea how we're going to mitigate the lethal effects of it short of either a widespread spiritual renewal, or a widespread disaster that brings everyone so low that they no longer have the interest or energy to focus on the sins of their enemies. If the choice is between prayer and disaster, I'll pick prayer. How about you?

When I look at the Parable of the Prodigal Son through the lens of the Qur'an, what I see is that there is not one Lost Son in this story, but two: the Prodigal and the Elder Brother. The Elder Brother may have been perfectly right in his assessment of the Prodigal. His brother may have been pretending to be remorseful all along, just to be restored to the household. His brother might very well leave them again in the future. Yet, whether the Elder Brother was right or wrong in his assessment of his brother, the poison was in him either way.

All the Elder Brother could know for sure is that his father had decided to bring the Prodigal back into the household for reasons known only to the father. As the father's eldest son, he was just as lost as his younger brother if he refused to trust his father's judgment. The only way for the Elder Brother to become un-lost was to set down his glass of poison, pick up a glass of chardonnay, and join the party. He need not have celebrated his brother's return, but he at least should have celebrated his father's joy, even if he did not understand or agree with it.

## **II. Focusing Our Faith**

When I read the Parable of the Prodigal Son, which is really the Parable of the Two Lost Sons, through the lens of the Qur'an, I see how my own self-righteous indignation toward others puts me in league with Iblis, or Satan. Satan and I are one when I have no compassion for those I perceive as inferior to me. Yet, when I read the same parable

through the lens that Judaism affords me, I understand why God continues to love me anyway, just as the father clearly loved his lost son.

The line from Genesis 1:26, about being created in God's image and likeness, says it all: we may all be imperfect creations just as the Qur'an says, but a light shines even within our deepest darkness that the darkness cannot overcome. No matter how bad we are, or how bad we become – even when we are so bad that no one in heaven or on earth can find anything good in us, God still finds goodness. Therefore, we are always invited to God's party whether we are more like the Prodigal or the Elder Brother.

This doesn't mean that God affirms or celebrates sin. The door to the party may be open, but we have to *choose* of our own free will to step inside. Notice that the father did not travel to the far country to rescue his son or bring the party to him. He waited and watched and hoped for his return. Unless the Prodigal chose to return home to the father's presence, he would be yearning for pig slop for the rest of his days.

Likewise, the father did not bring the party out to the field to celebrate with the Elder Brother in an unchanged state. He urged him to come celebrate inside the house. He reminded his son that everything the father has belongs to him. Yet, until or unless the Elder Brother stepped inside that open door to join the celebration, he would be left out in the cold.

What the father knew is that both of his Lost Sons had something within them that could be "found" ***provided that they were in the presence of the father***. Outside the father's presence, there was no party. No hope.

Speaking theologically, what this situation means is that, even though we are all imperfect, and even though our motives for returning home may not be entirely pure, when we choose God's presence over living in the "far country" or remaining in the fields, there is always hope. There is always the possibility that a Prodigal child, with a motive of pure self-interest, who only intends to stick around long enough for a few good meals and a nice change of clothes, may become transformed by God's generosity. There is always a chance that he sees clearly – perhaps for the first time in his life – how much better it is to dwell with the father than dwell with the pigs; even to be like the father than to be like an ungrateful son.

There is always hope for an Elder Brother, too, when he enters the celebration full of self-righteous indignation for the Prodigal yet nevertheless chooses to trust his father's judgment over his own. The Elder Brother may come around, realizing that it is better to be generous and get burned than never to be generous at all.

This parable tells me that there is always hope for *any* of us when we stop running from God and step through the door into God's house. There is hope because there is some part of God's light within us that prefers the light to the darkness.

When I put my Christian lens back on after viewing the story through Jewish and Muslim lenses, it is the Grace within it that jumps out at me stronger than ever. This story is all about the transformative power of Grace, even when it is offered to the ungrateful.

The Christian story reminds me that Grace came to us in the form of Jesus – came "while we were yet sinners" (Romans 5:8). Grace transformed our sin into God's salvation. The Christian story reminds me that Grace came to the "prostitutes, tax collectors and sinners" and to the self-righteous Pharisees. Grace came to the deserting disciples and to those who hammered the nails into Jesus's hands. The Grace of the Second Adam redeemed the sin of the First Adam, paving the way for all of us to live as sisters and brothers in Christ, and as sons and daughters of God (Romans 5:17-21).

Someone who dwells in darkness will never be transformed by darkness, but only by light. Someone whose heart is full of hate will never be transformed by hate but by love. Someone whose heart is full of self-righteous indignation will not be transformed by self-righteousness, but by self-giving. By Grace.

Even now, Grace has a ring ready to place on our fingers and a robe ready for us to wear, and Grace offers the embrace of our True Parent's fierce and expansive love.

This amazing Grace turns the story of the Lost into a story of the Found.