



A Son or a Hired Hand?

The Prodigal Son story told by Jesus in Luke 15:14-20 begins with a young man presumptuously asking his father for his inheritance ahead of time. He left home and went to a far country, where in his lavish and wasteful spending (hence the term *prodigal*) he soon saw that inheritance go up in smoke.

His resources had seemingly caused others to like him. Now his resources and his “friends” were gone. Out of money and out of food, he found himself working in a pigpen.

He came to his senses and went home, thinking the best he could expect was a job on his father’s farm—but to his astonishment (after all, the grace of God is amazing isn’t it?) his father restored him to his previous standing, hosted a grand celebration and lavished his love on him.

The prodigal son was living by law. The law is a contract—cause and effect—you do this and you can expect that. It’s a business arrangement.

Living by the law is not rocket science. You get what you earn and you deserve what you get. The law is what it is—nothing more, nothing less.

But, while living by and under law is simple and straightforward, grace is over on the other end of the spectrum—**grace is complicated.**

In his parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus used an example of the prodigal son sinking to one of the lowest places a Jewish audience at that time could imagine.

The prodigal son was feeding pigs—and not only that, he was so

hungry that he longed to fill his stomach with what he was feeding the pigs.

As the Message Bible translates Luke 15:16-20:

He was so hungry he would have eaten the corn cobs in the pig slop, but no one would give him any. That brought him to his senses. He said, “All those farmhands working for my father sit down to three meals a day, and here I am starving to death. I’m going back to my father. I’ll say to him, Father, I’ve sinned against God, I’ve sinned before you; I don’t deserve to be called your son. Take me on as a hired hand.” He got right up and went home to his father.

The father did not have a sign on the gate to his farmhouse advertising jobs. God is not looking for hired hands.

Now remember, this prodigal son was not above making outrageous requests of his father. He was not above taking advantage of his father’s “good graces.”

This was the same guy who had asked his father for his inheritance, ahead of time.

BUT, when the prodigal son *came to his senses*... he did not ask to be given something he did not deserve.

He did not ask for grace. Full restoration? Not in his wildest dreams! He just wanted a job—a chance to earn his keep and make a decent wage.

The prodigal son wanted to go home to his father, but like all human beings, the only road he knew that would take him there was the law.

He fully expected his father to respond to his egregious and flagrant transgressions with penalties, probation, penance, payback, prescriptions, programs, pledges and provisos.

The prodigal son anticipated receiving conditions, limitations, restrictions and probationary programs whereby he might prove himself.

That kind of response on his father’s part would be predictable, because when you live by the law that’s what you imagine when you really mess up.

The prodigal son did not return hoping to be given grace so he could once again be accepted by his father as his son.

The prodigal son simply hoped his father would give him a job, so he could pay his own way—and perhaps, pay back all the money he had wasted.

But his father did not have a sign on the gate to his farmhouse advertising jobs. **God is not looking for hired hands.**

Grace is the stubborn refusal of God to employ us on his farm. Nothing we can ever say or do can qualify you and me from earning or deserving you and me from earning or deserving God’s grace because it is not for sale.

Nothing can disqualify you or me from God’s grace except a proud and stubborn unwillingness to reach out and embrace the grace he freely offers. □

—Greg Albrecht

Join us for the complete message of “A Son or a Hired Hand?” at the audio teaching ministry of Christianity Without the Religion, the week of March 19, 2017.