

Kingdom Culture

Church as Family: Knowing God's Fatherhood – Part 2

Introduction and context

We are looking at the key cultures of God's Kingdom because we believe these to be essential foundations on which God will build us His church and generously give the life and power of the Spirit. Remember that culture is 'the way we do things around here.' The first of these cultures is *Family*. Heaven's government is exercised through the Father, Son and Holy Spirit living and functioning as a family. God's plan for His church is to be family. There can be significant problems for some when we think about family, especially if we have had difficult or even painful family experiences, or indeed any kind of damage in our relationship with authority figures in our lives.

The story of the Prodigal gives us an incredible insight into God's heart as a Father. This story, if understood, provides us with the clearest revelation as to the message of the good news of the gospel. In the first part of this session we looked at God as the Father who Himself can be described as *prodigal*. Prodigal means to be lavish and unrestrained in giving away, a great description of God's amazing grace.

There are some significant aspects to this story that would have been understood differently within the culture and practice of the day in which Jesus told the story.

- Having asked for His inheritance early, the son would have brought disgrace on the whole family in the eyes of the rest of the community, this was a terrible insult.
- In normal circumstances, the son would have been disowned and it would have been as if he no longer existed. The son was in effect saying to his father, "I wish you were dead."
- In running out to meet his son on his return, the father would have again been disgraced in the eyes of the community because the father, the head of the family should never be seen running in public. This was a highly undignified action and the father would have never made such a move normally within the culture.
- The father would have run to meet his son partly because of the incredible joy and relief at seeing him but also to protect him from the shame and possible stoning that the community would have inflicted on him. In OT Jewish culture he certainly would not have re-joined the family.

The father ran out to embrace his son the moment he saw him. The lesson we can learn from this is that as soon as a sinner's face is turned *homeward*, even though he may still be far away, our Father in heaven recognizes this change of heart, and sprints out to meet the child He so dearly loves. God doesn't say, "Let this sinner come to me and beg for my mercy." On the contrary God moves quickly with delight when He sees a child return to Him.

Additionally the father fell on his son's neck and kissed him (v 20). Consider what must be taking place here. The son was unquestionably filthy. The smell of garbage and pig slop must have been intense. Did the father care? Of course not! His son was a WONDERFUL sight to Him and nothing could diminish that. The kiss was a sign of the father's forgiveness. The kiss also shows us a God, a father who loves, reconciles and is comfortable with an intimate relationship with us. This is not a remote and distant God!

What is the significance of the gifts (sandals, a coat, a ring and a party!) the father gave to his son after his return home?

Four amazing gifts

When the prodigal returns in tears to his father, he begs him to allow him to work as a servant on the family estate. But the father would have none of this. His reaction speaks volumes about how God views

genuine contrition and repentance. This wonderful father provides his son with amazing gifts—each of which tells an extraordinary story of distinction and honour. We must remember that within the culture the very least the son could have expected was a severe beating and then being made to work with the servants.

“Bring him the best robe”

In addition to giving his son sandals and a ring, this loving father directed his servants to bring him a coat. But not just any coat. It had to be the very finest for his dear son (Lk.15: 22). The scriptures speak prolifically concerning the significance of garments. Bestowing such a gift was not only a sign of distinction and honour, but also a reflection of intimacy and affection. Jacob set his son Joseph apart from his other children with an exquisite garment (Gen. 37: 3). Hannah, the mother of Samuel also brought her son a coat every year when he served in the temple under Eli (1Sam. 2: 19). Mordecai was also given this distinction (Esther 8:15). The father dresses his son in a robe of righteousness. The robe covers the filthy rags of our lives. By being given the best robe the son was being treated like royalty. If this isn't outrageous grace!?

But why would the father give such an important gift to a son who had brought such great shame on the family? This is a question that must have been on the lips of older brother. The reason can only be that the father saw a state of heart in his son that was worthy of honour. The book of Zechariah records that God does this very thing to the priest Joshua (Zech. 3:4-5). Although we may not fully grasp God's desire to raise up the fallen, it is a part of His nature never the less.

He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with **princes** and has them inherit a throne of honour. For the foundations of the earth are the Lord's; upon them he has set the world. (1 Sam.2: 8)

“Put a ring on his finger”

The Bible also indicates that God's people are to hold positions of great distinction in His kingdom (Rev. 5:10). They will actually sit on thrones and govern the entire world (Rev. 20:4). This wonderful truth is also captured in the story of “The Prodigal Son.” When his repentant son returns, his father gives him a ring. A ring is a symbol of power and authority (Est. 8:10). It actually carries the weight of the one who gives it. Pharaoh bestowed such an honor on Joseph (Gen. 41:41-42). And God Almighty will do the same to His bride. The ring also represents the seal of God's love, just as the wedding rings exchanged by the bride and groom are a sign of their covenant, so too the father reminds his son of the covenant of love that exists between them.

“Put sandals on his feet”

The sandals picture freedom. Slaves at that time were barefoot. And although the prodigal wanted to be a servant, the father saw him as much more. He was a son and his father cherished him greatly. It is interesting that although God's people are referred to as servants (Rev. 7:3), they too are much more. At the end of His life Jesus called His disciples “friends” (Jn. 15:15). Ultimately they will be His bride. We are given such a gift – to give to others. Think of the imagery of the feet fitted with the readiness to proclaim the gospel of peace (Ephesians 6)

An amazing party!

The last gift the father bestows on his son is a great celebration. The joy of his return just had to be shared with others. Now consider the significance of this act as it pertains to those who repent and appeal to God for mercy. He is fully restored as a son at the father's table – such a high honour! The book of Revelation provides a brief glimpse into a wonderful celebration given in honor of Christ and His bride.

And a voice came out of the throne, saying, Praise our God, all you his servants, and ye that fear him, both small and great. And I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thundering's, saying, Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigns. Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honor to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come and his wife has made herself ready. And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the

righteousness of saints. And he says to me, Write, Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb.

This great wedding is a celebration of redemption's victory over sin. It is arguably the happiest moment in history. Although the scribes and Pharisees could not grasp how the bride makes herself ready, Jesus could. Those sinners who sought out the Messiah took a monumental step in that direction. Jesus knew precisely what was taking place when He received these prodigals that sought Him. He also knew that His Father in Heaven was preparing a wonderful array of gifts for them. Included among these gifts was a ring, a beautiful garment, a pair of sandals and a great feast.

Our Father God is full of.