

In whatever capacity #2: The Prodigal Son

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In the earlier article we discussed the idea of serving “in whatever capacity” and promised to apply it to the story of the prodigal son. This story begins in Luke 15:11, *“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.* Here was a man who had some wealth, and some level of status in the community. But being the working son on a large estate was not enough. So, *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.* This son wanted to be thought an important man, so he became a big spender. But, *After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need.* It wasn’t enough to just have money; as soon as it ran out his friends did, too.

Once he was broke, he had to find a way to support himself. You can imagine that he didn’t want to go back home, *so he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs.* Working with such despised, unclean animals had to be the most unpleasant job imaginable to a Jew. And the pay wasn’t even enough to keep him alive. He was so hungry that *he longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.* He was brought so low that he would have gladly eaten what was to be given the pigs, but he couldn’t because that would have gotten him fired. No one would help him at all. In his search for elevated status he had fallen completely to the bottom.

How long he struggled in this situation, we don’t know, but *“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.**’* Totally humbled now, he realized that he would do anything, even the least important job, to be able to return to even a glimpse of his former life. Status was no longer important to him. But having someone to care for him was. He was now glad to do the dirty work. He was glad to be a slave, to serve in whatever capacity he is needed.

Having made this agonizing decision, *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 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.’*

It is a great moment, but even though his father’s grace is somewhat overwhelming here, it doesn’t mean that the son never has to work again. Sometimes we think of this wonderfully happy ending and don’t think about what happens afterward. This son had learned his lesson, and would now contribute eagerly to the development of the estate by serving however he could.

We remember that the other son wasn’t taking all of this very well. Perhaps he had reckoned he would lose a part of his inheritance. *“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!”*

The older son had been doing the menial work all this time, but didn’t see the glory or purpose in it. He should have known that the inheritance would only be worth something if he worked and managed it properly, paying attention even to the little things. This is the key that we discussed in the previous article. We must work with enough vision to realize that everything we do contributes to the increasing value of the estate. Are we interested in the immediate returns or the long-term investment? Are we willing to serve in whatever capacity we are needed?

Jesus understood this principle very well. He was not afraid to give up his position with God to do the dirty work of coming to earth, living with men, teaching them truth, and washing their feet. He even endured the worst job of all, **dying on the cross**, so that the whole estate of heaven would be magnified.

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