



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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Servant or Son?

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This paper was triggered by something Tom Are, senior pastor of Shallowford Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, GA, said in a sermon on Sunday, January 1, 1989.

The scripture base for Tom's sermon that day was the very familiar parable of the Prodigal Son. When he came to the part about the younger brother coming to himself in that far country after he had wasted all his living and was feeding the pigs, he reflected upon what might have been going on in the mind of the younger brother. In describing that mental struggle, Tom suggested several possibilities. Among them was the thought that the younger brother might not have wanted to come back home as a son, but only as a servant. Tom just touched that thought, but it started me thinking.

I want to become that younger brother and enter into that mental struggle. But before I do, I need to make two disclaimers.

The first is that I know that the title of this paper is sexist. I struggled with the problem for quite a while, and then decided that, since the story as I use it was about a man and his struggles, I would go with the sexist language, and try to be inclusive in my summary at the end of the paper.

The second is that this paper is not an attempt to deal with the main point of the Parable of the Prodigal Son. I am only using the story as a springboard for my own thoughts on the subject of servant or son. I am well aware that Jesus told the story, and the other two that go with it, to illustrate an entirely different point.

For a little while, I just want to be that younger brother who was in a terrible spot, and who had an important decision to make.

I am the younger brother in the story that Jesus told about a father and his two sons. My father was a wealthy landowner who raised fine crops and had many cattle and sheep. My brother and I worked well under our father's supervision, and everyone assumed that we would one day take over the land and stock and would be wealthy in our own right – dutiful sons living up to all the expectations of us.

Only I wasn't very happy with my lot in life. I was young, and ambitious, and full of energy. I had dreams and ideas that went far beyond life on a farm.

Accordingly, I asked for my share of the inheritance, and declared my intention to go out and make my own way in the world. I was so excited with my plans and with my preparations to leave that I never noticed the pain in my father's eyes.

My share of the inheritance was more than I had anticipated. Youthful and naive as I was, it looked like enough to support me in the style that I wanted for my whole life. I wouldn't have to worry about a thing. So, with joy and anticipation, I set off, not to seek my fortune, but to enjoy the fortune I already had to the fullest degree.

And I did enjoy my fortune. So did a lot of other people. I had more friends than I had ever had – friends for life, I thought.

I soon found out how mistaken I was. My money didn't last forever. My friends weren't friends for life. They disappeared when I began to need something from them.

For the first time in my life, I was hungry. To make matters worse, there was a depression in the country where I was living, and I couldn't even get a job. The only real skills I had were farming and tending stock.

Finally, I was hungry and desperate enough to hire out with a man who put me to work feeding his pigs. I was so hungry that I even considered eating some of the food I was feeding to the pigs. It was then that I began to seriously consider my situation and what I could do about it.

Obviously, there was nothing for me where I was.

I began to think of the life I had once had. In my mind's eye I saw the house of my father, and was reminded of the secure life I had once lived there. I hadn't maintained any contact. For all I knew, my father and my brother had been hit by the same depression that had devastated the country where I was. At first, I had been too busy spending my fortune to write to them. Then I had felt too ashamed.

In my hunger and dissatisfaction, I found myself increasingly thinking about how it was back home. Everybody there was living better than I. At least that is what I told myself. Maybe I ought to go back home.

It was at this point that I got caught up in a terrific mental struggle.

What did I want to go back home to? To being a son with all the responsibility that went with it? Desperate though I was, that didn't appeal to me one bit. I liked an easy life with minimum responsibility. I thought about the life of the servants. Growing up, I hadn't paid much attention to them. They were just there to do whatever was required. They had their regular duties. They didn't have to make decisions. They were well fed, had suitable clothing, and a warm and comfortable house in which to live. When their daily tasks were completed, they had no further responsibilities. That life style appealed to me a lot.

So I decided what I would do. I would go back home, but not to be a son. I would be a servant in my father's household. The only thing I had to do was to figure out what to tell my father so that he would hire me.

I had an inspiration. I would humble myself. I would disclaim sonship. I would declare myself unworthy because of the way I had been living my life. My father would feel sorry for me and give me the job I wanted. I would no longer be son, but servant. That didn't seem to be such a hard decision to make.

I gathered up what few possessions I had left and set off on the journey home. On the way, I practiced what I would say to my father. I figured he might want me to come back into the household as a son after he had properly chastised me for my misspent life. I didn't want that. I wanted all the comfort and ease of life in that household without any of the responsibility.

As it turned out, that wasn't possible. It might have been if my father had acceded to my request. I had counted on his being angry enough with me to disown me, and to have enough compassion to give me the job I wanted.

My father didn't disown me. He didn't even listen to the speech I had so carefully prepared. I was his son. There wasn't any other way to look at it.

I learned a profound lesson that day. I didn't have any options about being a servant or a son. Even if I had a job as one of the servants in the household, I was still a son. I couldn't ever be just a servant. I was always a son. I couldn't escape the position, nor the responsibility that went with it.

I was deeply moved by my father's obvious love for me. I endured the partying that went on in celebration of my return. I even allowed myself to enjoy it to a degree. And then I had to face the reality that my position in the household was that of son, no matter what I did nor how I served.

It had been easy to make the decision that I was no longer a son when I was in the far country, poverty stricken and remorseful for the kind of life I had lived. What I had not understood was that I could not make that decision. It wasn't mine to make.

The simple, eternal reality was that I was my father's son. I could behave as if I were not. I could deny that I was. I could waste my living. I could do terrible, destructive things. I could not cease to be my father's son.

Being servant or son was never the decision. What I could decide – and must decide – was how I would go about being my father's son. I could have the inheritance. I could go to the far country. I could waste everything I had. I could feed the pigs. I could even come back home and be a servant in my father's house. But I could not stop being my father's son.

My brother wanted to declare that I was not his brother. That wasn't possible either. What I did and what he did didn't make that determination. Whether he liked it or not, I was his brother.

Neither my brother nor I had a choice. We were sons no matter what. And we were brothers no matter what. And we had all the responsibility that went with being who we were.

Neither my brother nor I had a choice about being sons and brothers, but we did have choices about how we dealt with being sons and brothers. Whatever we chose and whatever we did, they would be the choices and actions of sons and brothers.

Even though I am son and brother, I choose who I see myself to be. Therefore, I can choose to see myself as a son, or I can choose to see myself as a servant. The choice doesn't change who I really am, but it does make a profound difference about how I function. I live my life as if I am who I see myself to be.

I'm glad that my father did not accept my decision to see myself as merely a servant in his household. I'm glad that he was wise enough and loving enough to bring me back into the household as the son that I was. I'm glad that he did not let me try to escape my responsibility as son. I'm glad that he put me in a position where I had to face what it meant to be both son and brother.

My role as younger brother in the parable is ended.

The story, as Jesus told it, suggests that the younger brother may have been penitent, and that he did not consider himself worthy to be a son in his father's household. Whatever the intention, the father responded to the fact that his son had come back home. He didn't even know whether his son had repented. He didn't know about the possibility that his son was seeking to escape the responsibilities of sonship. What he knew was that his son, whom he loved, had come back home. That was enough.

There is no way to earn sonship. Nor is there a way to retain or lose sonship. Being a child of one's father is a given, and with this statement I move away from sexist language. All of us – female and male – are daughters and sons by virtue of being born. What an obvious statement.

But I suspect that many of us have not allowed ourselves to believe who we are. Rather, there is a tendency to believe we can make choices about our identity.

We can't.

We can choose what to do about being daughters and sons. We can waste our lives. We can feed the pigs. We can even eat the pig's food. We can be mere servants in the household. We can be co-owners. We can share the leadership. We can be loving and compassionate. We can do whatever we choose.

Whatever we choose to do, we will do it as daughters and sons.

I want to choose to do what is pleasing to my earthly parents who love me. I want to choose to do with my life what I believe is pleasing to my creator who loves me. I want my life to reflect the goodness and love and glory of God.

Then I will express in my life who I am created to be.