



Writings of W. Burney Overton

Burney's Papers

1995 Series, No. 3

The Awakening of a Prideful Conformist

July 25, 1995

W. Burney Overton

The story of the Prodigal Son is among the best known of the parables of Jesus – so well known that it is hardly necessary to retell it. Not so well known is the fact that it is one of a trilogy of stories designed to make a quite specific point to those to whom it is told.

The stories of the trilogy – often discussed separately – are, “The Lost Sheep,” “The Lost Coin,” and “the Lost Son.” Hearing the stories, one knows about the one sheep out of a hundred that is lost, one coin out of ten, and one son out of two. We know which sheep and which coin were lost, and, typically, we assume the lost son was the younger brother who went away, wasted his living, came to himself, and returned home to a royal welcome.

I wonder if the younger brother was the only one who was lost. I wonder if he is the one to whom the story points.

Parables, as you know, are stories told to illustrate and make a point. Jesus used them very effectively to communicate his messages to his hearers. Therefore, to be clear about his intent in telling a parable, it is necessary to know his audience. In the case of the trilogy of the “Lost...” found in Luke 15:1-32, it is especially important to know to whom Jesus is speaking to be able to decide which son is the lost one, and, indeed, to hear the message in the other two stories.

According to the scripture, the tax collectors and sinners (considered to be the dregs of humanity – the lost) were gathering to listen to Jesus. The by now ever-present Pharisees and scribes were there keeping an eye – and ear – on Jesus to find cause to silence him. So Jesus told them a story – in three parts, as we have noted.

While I am sure the tax collectors and sinners were encouraged hearing the stories of the lost being found, I suggest that Jesus was really directing his message to the Pharisees and scribes – the righteous upper crust of Jewish society at that time, who saw themselves as exemplary in every way.

In this setting, I am giving special attention to the Lost Son story in the trilogy. I am taking the part of the elder brother, who, whether he recognizes it or not, is a prototype of the Pharisees and scribes. He is, I suggest, a prideful conformist, but he doesn't know that he is. I tell the story through his eyes.

Almost from his birth, my younger brother has been a source of irritation to me – and of deep sorrow to my father. He just never did fit in. He refused to conform to what was expected of him. Oh, he was always fun-loving and full of life, but he just didn't seem to have any respect for the traditions, and refused to fit the proper role of a son of a highly regarded member of the upper-class Jewish community. Many a time, my father was terribly embarrassed by my brother's behavior.

I was embarrassed, too, and tried to make up for my brother's lacks by being obedient in every way. I tried to be everything my father could possibly want a son to be.

Maybe I could be conscientious enough to balance his seeming indifference to our father's feelings – and to what was expected of him, given our father's position in the community.

Insofar as I was concerned, it was the last straw when my brother came to our father and requested his share of the inheritance. It was a very selfish act on his part, and most disturbing to our father. I was utterly outraged. After that brazen request, I wouldn't even speak to him, much less tell him goodbye or wish him God's speed when he took his inheritance and went away.

I knew my father was heart-broken, although he never discussed my brother's actions with me, nor spoke ill of him in any way. Even so, I could see that he grieved every day for his son who had gone away. I was determined to try all the harder to please him. Maybe I could relieve his grief a little. I would do my best.

The years went by, and my father continued to be grief-stricken. From time to time, we heard stories of the wild life my brother was living in another country. The last we heard was that he had spent all his inheritance and was living in abject poverty.

Father never heard from my brother directly and never tried to contact him. He just grieved. Often he stood at the door of our home, looking down the road my brother had traveled when he went away. Mostly, he just waited – and waited – and waited.

It was almost more than I could stand. My father's pain was like a sharp knife twisting in me, and my heart burned with anger at my brother who would do such a thing to his father.

Even more than when my brother was at home, I believed I must make up for his shortcomings. I did everything to be the best son I could possibly be. I was determined that my father would experience no suffering because of me. I ran our businesses efficiently and well. I was attentive to my father in every way. Following in his footsteps, I took my place in the councils of the synagogue. I served well. I was an example to all of the life of a faithful Jew. I conformed to every law of the Torah. I was obedient to the interpretations of the rabbi. In every way, I lived so that my father would be proud of me – proud enough, I hoped, to make up for his grief over his other son.

“At least,” I told myself, “My father can take comfort in my faithfulness.” And I felt completely justified in cancelling my brother out of my life. It was as if he never existed.

I think my father did take comfort in my faithfulness, but he never cancelled my brother out, nor gave up hope. Each day he watched and waited. His sadness broke my heart, and I strove all the harder to conform to everything that could possibly be expected of a dutiful son and a conscientious Jewish citizen. However, I could never do enough, and I was even more angry with my brother. I hated him. Insofar as I was concerned, he was dead – and good riddance. No son had a right to treat his father that way.

As the years came and went, I sometimes thought that my father might even be accepting that my brother was gone for good. He didn't stand at the door and watch down the road so often, and, most of the time, busied himself with his work. Even so, ours was a solemn household. There was never much fun or laughter, and I seldom brought my friends home to party with me.

One day – it was harvest time and we were very busy – I came in from the fields to find the house ablaze with light and the servants scurrying about, obviously doing the things necessary to provide a lavish dinner and party. I was so surprised that I just stood outside the house and watched. The musicians were playing in the great hall, and a large crowd of people were already out on the dance floor. The banquet table was set, brightly lighted, and laden with huge quantities of food. Obviously, it was a gala occasion, but I couldn't imagine what it was about. Nothing like this had occurred at our house in many years.

To say the least, I was surprised – no, astonished – actually dumbfounded. What could possibly have happened to cause my father to set such a celebration in motion?

Since I didn't see my father anywhere, I stopped one of the servants and asked him, "What on earth is going on here? What has happened of such significance that we are celebrating like this?" Actually, I asked only one question. "What is this all about?"

"Your brother has come back home," he said, "and your father has ordered this great celebration because he is back safe and sound."

"My father has done what?" I shouted. I was furious. Almost speechless. Totally outraged. Uncomprehending and unbelieving. That no-good son of my father had returned home, and my father was celebrating. What was he thinking? His son, who brazenly demanded his portion of the inheritance. His son, gone these many years, and not one word to my father in all that time. His son, who wasted his inheritance and ended up living in poverty. Why had he come back? What right did he have to impose himself on my father after treating him so badly? He ought to have had the grace to stay away, even if he was poverty-stricken. His returning home was nothing to celebrate. It was an affront to me. I refused to join in.

So I wandered around outside, feeling even more outraged at every new sign of celebration. My father's worthless son. He had come back, and my father was celebrating – celebrating more lavishly than I had ever known him to. I was more angry than I had ever been – and I had a right to be. My brother – I wouldn't even think of him as a brother – my father's other son had no right to anything at our home. In no way did he deserve such a celebration.

I wasn't very civil to my father when he came to me to try to persuade me to join in the celebration. In fact, I was shocked that I spoke to him as I did. I had never treated him that way in all my life. But I had a right to be that angry – both with my father and

that no-good son of his.

With bitterness dripping from my voice, I shouted at my father. “How could you do this to me? I’ve served you like a slave all these years. I’ve obeyed your every command. I’ve preserved and built your fortune. I’ve made you proud of me in the market place and in the synagogue. I am the most faithful son any parent could hope to have. And you have hardly said ‘Thank you’ to me, much less ever offered to have even a small party for me and my friends. Sometimes I wonder if you love or appreciate me at all.”

I was so enraged that I was near to tears. My voice shook as I continued to shout at my father. “This other son of yours – how can you even call him a son anymore? – took your money and squandered it on parties, and gambling, and even on prostitutes. All these years, he has shown you no love nor consideration whatsoever.” I was merciless in my denunciation of that son of his. He was no brother of mine. I would not claim him. Never.

I had more to say. “Now he shows up at your door and practically demands that you take him in, (I don’t know where that came from) and you do – you put beautiful clothes on him – adorn him with rich jewels – and now you’ve killed the fatted calf to celebrate his return.”

“Father, how can you do such a thing to me?” I could only glare in outrage at him, although I was beginning to feel ashamed and guilty at my outburst.

But I was justified to feel so outraged. I was the loyal one. I was the one who deserved a party.

My father stood quietly, looking into my eyes. The expression on his face was an odd mixture of joy and sadness. I strained to hear his words, spoken very softly and with great intensity. “My son, you are everything you have said you are. I count on you. I depend on you. I look to you to take care of me. And all that I have is already yours. No father could ever have a more faithful and dutiful son. But, my son, your brother, who was dead, is alive. He was lost – oh, so lost – and he has been found. We have to celebrate and rejoice.” His voice was charged with emotion.

“We have to celebrate and rejoice!”

No, we don’t. I don’t. I won’t. I’m not going to ignore what my brother – not my brother – my father’s other son – has done to him. Maybe my father will, but I won’t.

I walked away before I exploded to my father with what I was really thinking and feeling. Outraged though I was, I still couldn’t do that to him. But I wasn’t about to join in a celebration just because my brother had come back home. Not after what he had done. He needed to be punished. Not partied.

Besides, my brother had already gotten his inheritance. He didn't deserve to get any more. He certainly didn't deserve to have any of what I had worked so hard to accumulate. Dead – alive. Lost – found. What difference did that make? I refused to have any part in welcoming him back. "I'm the good son," I told myself. "I'm the deserving one. I've kept all the rules. I've done all that was expected of me – and much more. I've earned everything I already have and all I will receive in my inheritance. I am right. This time, my father – and his other son – are wrong. I can't just stand by and let this happen. I will not. It's my duty to protect my father. I will do my duty." My heart was filled with hatred for that other son of my father.

In my distraught state, I continued to wander outside the house, feeling even more enraged as I listened to the noise of the party going on inside. It should have been my party. He – my father's other son – didn't deserve any part of it. He ought to be sent back to that life of poverty he had brought on himself. He had no right to be here.

I don't remember ever feeling so lonely.

I don't know why it happened, but I was aware that other thoughts were beginning to intrude upon the angry ones that dominated me. I saw my father's face again filled with both joy and sadness. I heard his soft, intense voice, "You are everything a father could possibly desire in a son. No one could be more faithful than you. But, my son, your brother was dead and is alive. He was lost and is found."

Try as I would, I couldn't get away from that look on my father's face, nor those words of his. But I was right to feel as I did, I kept telling myself. That other son didn't deserve anything from my father, nor from me. Then, to my utter surprise, my self-righteousness and my anger dissolved within me. I saw it all in a totally different way. Of course, I was a faithful and obedient son, but that wasn't why my father loved me. He loved me because I was his son. Of course, my brother (I was surprised at how easily I thought of him as my brother) had wasted his inheritance in riotous living, but that was no reason for my father to withhold his love. My brother was my father's son, too, and he loved him as he loved me.

No matter what he had done with his life, the truth was that my brother had come to himself, and he had come back home. My brother, who was dead (separated), is now alive (back in relationship). He was lost, and he is found.

Suddenly, I woke up. My eyes were opened, and I, as my brother had, came to myself. I too, came from death to life – from being lost to being found.

My father saw me the moment I stepped in the door of the great banquet hall. He knew, without my saying a word, what had happened to me. With outstretched arms, he came to me, his face aglow with joy.

What a night of rejoicing it was – for all three of us!