



The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith

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The New York Times bestselling author of *The Songs of Jesus* uncovers the essential message of Jesus, locked inside his most familiar parable.

Newsweek called *New York Times* bestselling author Timothy Keller a "C.S. Lewis for the twenty-first century" in a feature on his first book, *The Reason for God*. In that book, he offered a rational explanation for why we should believe in God. Now, in *The Prodigal God*, Keller takes his trademark intellectual approach to understanding Christianity and uses the parable of the Prodigal Son to reveal an unexpected message of hope and salvation.

Within that parable Jesus reveals God's prodigal grace toward both the irreligious and the moralistic. This book will challenge both the devout and skeptics to see Christianity in a whole new way.

The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith Details

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Timothy J. Keller**

From Reader Review The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith for online ebook

Mike E. says

It is hard to imagine a person who loves God, or a person considering the existence of God, not benefitting from reading this beautiful exposition of the parable of the two lost sons (aka, the prodigal son). The book is simultaneously short and simple, deep and profound. It is one that I will return to again and again. God used this book to penetrate my soul deeply resulting in personal confession and worship.

Quotes:

If, like the elder brother, you believe that God ought to bless you and help you because you have worked so hard to obey him and be a good person, then Jesus may be your helper, your example, even your inspiration, but he is not your Savior. You are serving as your own Savior.

It's not the repentance that causes the father's love, but rather the reverse.

Repentance is not less than that, but it is much more, because the list approach isn't sufficient to address the condition of the elder brother.

To truly become Christians we must also repent of the reasons we ever did anything right.

The key difference between a Pharisee and a believer in Jesus is inner-heart motivation. Pharisees are being good but out of a fear-fueled need to control God.

Rather, he is saying that the inevitable sign that you know you are a sinner saved by sheer, costly grace is a sensitive social conscience and a life poured out in deeds of service to the poor. Younger brothers are too selfish and elder brothers are too self-righteous to care for the poor.

Religion operates on the principle of "I obey—therefore I am accepted by God." The basic operating principle of the gospel is "I am accepted by God through the work of Jesus Christ—therefore I obey."

Natalie Vellacott says

I didn't get on with this at all. It started with the title and although someone tried to persuade me not to get distracted by it, it is on every page! Choosing a less offensive title, however, wouldn't have made this a better book.

Keller dissects the parable of the prodigal son. He introduces the subject as if he has some new and profound revelation, but actually most of the material has been documented before. The things that were new have, in my opinion, been found as a result of Keller reading far more into the parable than was intended by Jesus. John MacArthur once mentioned that numerous preachers had spent a lot of time considering what various characters in the parables may have been intending/thinking. He points out that none of them were thinking

anything because they were fictional! Sometimes, it's best just to take the story at face value. It can be worth looking at the cultural context but going beyond that and seeking hidden meanings can lead to some dubious places.

Keller reintroduces a lot of the material found in *Desiring God* by John Piper. I didn't rate this book either. He focuses on affections as being triggered by an emotional response to God/Jesus. He makes this an essential part of salvation. He doesn't back this up with Scripture. In fact, I found that a lot of what he said wasn't backed up convincingly with Scripture....He does talk about obedience but fails to mention that we are told in John 14 vs 15 "If you love Me, you will obey My commands." There is nothing in this verse or elsewhere about manipulating emotions or affections.

Someone else commented in their review that Keller is trying to get us to worship God for Who He is. Obviously this should be our goal, but the reviewer pointed out that God encourages us to look for eternal rewards. (Store up treasure in heaven etc) He points out that if the hope of eternal life was removed then it would leave people desperately trying to force themselves to worship God with no expectation of reward. How can any of us be expected to do that especially with fallen hearts....? I think Keller may be setting a lot of people up for disappointment when they can't find the experiences or emotions they have been told to seek...

A pastor I know once said that he thought Keller was a dangerous man. Now, I can see why. He has enough intelligence for his opinions to be adopted and to become mainstream. I will stick to the likes of MacArthur who quote Scripture throughout. He has also written a book on the prodigal son which I highly recommend; *A Tale of Two Sons*.

Bill says

2011: I finally read my first Tim Keller book! Excellent, very engaging. His main point -- there are two brothers in the parable, not just one. And thus, moralism is just as bad as the behaviour we normally call sin. Which means that both the 'sinful' person and the 'moral' person are both far from the Father, because neither is relying on his grace to meet their true need. I also loved the chapter on hope, where he presents the biblical theme of exile and homecoming. This chapter was where I most agreed with the comparisons I've heard between Tim Keller and CS Lewis.

Mike Knox says

A great introduction to Jesus and Christianity for moderns and postmoderns. Keller takes us deep into the heart of one of finest stories ever told by Jesus. The self-righteous will squirm as Keller points out that there are two prodigals, not one, in the story. But both kinds of people—religious and rebels—will feel the attractive pull of Christ when they discover what kind of elder brother He is.

Following Clowney, Keller has seen deeply into this parable. His skill and scope in applying its truth to modern people is breathtaking. His ability to relate Christ to so many things people today care about makes this book the best candidate to give to searching friends.

Angela Blount says

For such a relatively small tome, the impact it's left on me has been tremendous.

***prod-i-gal/prodigel--adjective**

1. recklessly extravagant
2. having spent everything

(The duality of that definition never occurred to me before I got a hold of The Prodigal God.)

This book dissects one of the most oft-recited parables in all of Jesus' ministry: The Prodigal Son. Though the author is quick to point out that the story Jesus used as a teaching illustration wasn't named that by Him...he simply started out by saying: "There was a man who had two sons." Keller suggests that instead of focusing on the lost son, as so many reading or teaching this parable are prone to do, we consider looking at it as a story of TWO lost sons. And from there, he lays out a studious argument for why both sons were in fact equally lost in their own destructive ways. One went off in overt rebellion and in-your-face dishonor/selfishness, while the other suffered from a more insidious heart condition—one masked by legalism and pride. Both were equally wrong. Both grieved their father.

It took until I was well into adulthood before I grasped the actual context of this story. Jesus was hanging out with a crowd of what Jewish society at the time would have considered the most 'undesirable' people—tax collectors and other all-around sinners. The uber-religious folk of that time/culture (Pharisees and teachers of the law) were of course watching and muttering amongst themselves about the poor quality of company Jesus was keeping. It was in the midst of this setting that Jesus told not one but three parables, culminating with the one The Prodigal God focuses on.

If I let myself highlight everything that struck me as poignant in this book, there would be more highlighting than not. >.< But here are a few favorite/illuminating quotes:

*"Religion operates on the principle of "I obey—therefore I am accepted by God." The basic operating principle of the gospel is "I am accepted by God through the work of Jesus Christ—therefore I obey."

*"The key difference between a Pharisee and a believer in Jesus is inner-heart motivation. Pharisees are being good but out of a fear-fueled need to control God."

*"If, like the elder brother, you believe that God ought to bless you and help you because you have worked so hard to obey him and be a good person, then Jesus may be your helper, your example, even your inspiration, but he is not your Savior. You are serving as your own Savior."

Keller also brought to my attention this critical point I'll admit I somehow overlooked for my almost entire life: It was the wild younger son who ultimately repented and reconciled himself to his father...but we're left not knowing if the self-righteous elder son did or not. (Jesus may have invented the cliffhanger ending. >.>)

If I've not realized the depth and significance of such a small piece of scripture, I have to wonder how very limited my understanding of the rest of it must be. And I'm both humbled and inspired to spend more consistent time in studying that which my tiny mind can never fully comprehend—the mysterious and boundless nature of God.

Stephen says

Exceptional. A fairly quick read through the parable of the prodigal son, but per usual Tim Keller infuses a cultural context for today with many readers in identifying as a 'younger son'--those who are free spirited and want no other control in their life but their own, and the 'elder brothers' many people who may in fact be practicing Christians, but are relying on their moral performance and control of their own lives to save themselves.

In the end Tim brings us back to the gospel...whether we struggle with either brother's mentality, we still need God to transform our lives :)

Highly recommend for current Christians or those who are curious about Christianity

Ebookwormy1 says

A compelling sermon drew this book to my attention. Much of Keller's commentary on the Parable of the Two Lost Sons (aka The Prodigal Son) has crept into evangelicalism in the almost decade since it's publication. But his insights into the sanctimonious legality of the older brother and licentious profligate adventures of the younger brother remain convicting. In the spirit of confession, I acknowledge that I am firmly in the older brother's camp of pharisees.

Yet the broader, tougher teachings of the parable remain misunderstood and do not seem to be internalized to the same degree by the evangelical community. How do we older brother types embrace the cost of welcoming the younger brother back? How do we respond with joy to the Father's incredible generosity to all people - even those that have hurt us? (I remain surprised that the parable of the generous vineyard owner was not included, and found myself wondering how Keller would expound on the passage of Matthew 20, culminating with verse 15 " Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?") How do we work through the longing for home that will only be satisfied in heaven? It was the broadening of the parable to examine themes that run through the Bible, and the exposition of the longing for home, both it's pervasiveness and elusiveness, that particularly challenged me in the pages of Chapter 6. In this chapter, Keller makes reference to the first chapter of C. Plantinga's "Engaging God's World: A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning and Living (Eerdmans, 2002), a book that made my to-read list.

"...we have been living in a world that no longer fits our deepest longings...story after story contains the pattern of exile. The message of the Bible is that the human race is a band of exiles trying to come home." (Keller, The Prodigal God, page 108-109)

Part of what makes Keller so approachable --and so celebrated--is his use of cultural references, particularly those from literature and film, to expound Biblical truths without overshadowing them. I found his

discussion of the movie Amadeus, which I watched when much younger, compelling to the point that I would like to watch it again with the wisdom of age and the insight of Salieri as a co-suffering older brother. Explored alongside Christian classics such as CS Lewis' "The Four Loves" and "The Weight of Glory" and works by Luther, Bonhoeffer and Tolkien, Keller also weaves in the more secular "East of Eden" by Steinbeck, Knowles "A Separate Peace," and Dineson's "Babette's Feast" demonstrating two truths: 1) Good writers read, and 2) Good writers evoke further exploration by their readers.

Finally, Keller's breezy, pastoral style examines these Biblical truths and cultural confluences in a mere 150 pages, making this an excellent book to share with both "curious outsiders and established insiders of the Christian faith, both to those Jesus calls 'younger brothers' and those he calls 'elder brothers' in the famous parable." (Keller, *The Prodigal God*, xvi). I highly recommend this book for personal and group study, as well as a small gift for loved ones both resistant to or convinced of the gospel message.

Other books from Christian living include:

The Green Letters, Stanford, 1981

<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

Ken says

Quick read. Small book (both physically and in its 148 pp). Whole thing is based on the parable of the prodigal son. Most of us just think it's about forgiving Rowdy Roddy (#2 Son), but Keller spends 150 pp. telling us, "Nope. Wrong." Nicely, I mean.

For him, the parable is about equally bad bros -- both the prodigal who burns through Dad's money and then comes back as a penitent AND the elder, who resents the fact that his father welcomes Rowdy home. Guess who comes out smelling like a Biblical rose? Yep. Dad.

Anyway, Keller first divides much of mankind between "elder brother" and "younger brother" types -- the tow-the-rope, self-described pillars of society and religion and the free spirits who go off and blow it off. They're equally sinful, in their way, and Keller equates religious zealots who judge others as being guilty of the elder son's sin. Cool. He takes it beyond that, drawing in a few literary references along the way, and finishing with a rather open and refreshing view of religion (Christianity started as an anti-religion, if that helps).

Easy, thought-provoking stuff. Atheists who dismiss believers are in here too. Guess what? Elder son sorts. Just like the Pharisees. Go figure....

Jbb Lim says

Review to come. This is what I like about reading the parable of "The Prodigal Son". A context which I'm yearning for.

I know of many who has heard Jesus's ever famous parable "The Prodigal Son". And I know of many who hasn't got the chance to hear about it too, which I think they might have a hint since many story's adaptation has minor hints of this parable. In my years of being a believer of Christ, this parable speaks to me in so many ways. It has so many dimensions that this can be a very good material for all people (especially Christians).

Only 7 chapters and this book is able to astound me by realizing how one parable is able to sum up the Bible as a whole. I never knew who was the original audience that Jesus was REALLY speaking to when it was being told.

Tim Keller started out by clarifying the definition of Prodigal:

- 1) Recklessly Extravagant
- 2) Having Spent Everything

Note this, this parable was a response to the grumbling Pharisees around him and Jesus starts the story by saying "There was a man who had two sons." Now, this is where the discussion starts.

Firstly, Timothy has laid down all the foundation of the Middle Eastern patriarchal practices when he further breakdown the story by explaining how inappropriate these two sons has shown towards their father. Secondly, this book shows us there were two types of sons who sins against the father. The "Younger Brother" is the one who has rebel but repented. The "Elder Brother" would be the one who refuses to forgive both the father & brother for what he thinks he should be the one getting rewarded.

Our society is divided into two cultures, as Keller points out. The culture of the "older brother" is the conventional moral conformist, commonly known for "stability" as well as striving to please authority figures. The "younger brother" culture lives by their own rules, walking a path of self-discovery. Every person gravitates to one of these two categories, and some combine the two. Both cultures proclaim, "If those people would follow our example, the world would be a better place." Our problem is that, no matter what side of the cultural divide we land on, we still play the role of the two lost sons, alienating ourselves from the Father by a self-centered focus on either keeping all the rules or breaking them all.

Overall, I love how this parable has executed for the greater good for the Christian community. Now I know why many are getting away from the Christian's faith. It is because of us who portrays so much like the "Elder Brother" that drives people away from God. Good read!

Ratings: 5 out of 5 stars

My Blogspot Review

Elizabeth says

Keller has been called the C.S. Lewis of our day, and I agree they are similar in clarity of thought and expression. (Keller's work is not as dense or full of useful illustrations as Lewis'.) In this book, he discusses the parable usually referred to as the prodigal son, but focuses on the "prodigal" (reckless) love of the father in the story, which of course is really about God's reckless, pursuing love of us. He talks a lot about the older brother and how we might be more like the older brother than the younger, but how God pursues him, too, in all his curmudgeonly religiosity.

April 2018: What stood out to me the most in this reading of the book was Keller's discussion of spiritual homesickness--we are all longing for our heavenly home and will experience glimpses of it here. I appreciate the way he creates contrast, such as between the two lost brothers, but then introduces a 3rd option we hadn't thought of, like Jesus as the elder brother who pursues us in our state of lostness. And although I said his work is not as full of useful illustrations, he does give plenty of apt examples and illustrations from other works, from Amadeus to Babette's Feast.

Brian says

I genuinely liked this book. I think the best thing about it is the prose style. Keller is one of the cleanest prose writers I've read in a long time and even the pages look undaunting.

I have been grappling with Jesus and Paul a bit more recently so this was good as it most definitely offers an "Old Perspective." While I suspect further study will reveal a bit more precision about what Jesus was talking about (for instance Jesus talks more about sins of honor, shame, and oppression than about "selfishness, pride and sin"), but his analysis is very right on about our own time. In America, we do fall into older, self righteous older brothers and carefree, fun-focused younger brothers. And it is to Keller's credit that he sees the connections between the two. While much of it is old hat, it's often quite poignant, especially when he points out that we can turn even our repentance into a means of trying to justify ourselves.

I do have two related criticisms though. Gratitude by Leithart made me realize, subtly but surely, that while the West has wanted to have people doing good simply for goodness' sake and without hope of reward, either since the Reformation or since modernity. But this is not what Jesus taught. He taught that, instead of looking for rewards from men, we were to do things expecting and hoping in a reward from God. Keller's language about the Older Brother doing things, not for the Father, but for the inheritance is potentially confusing. While it's true that we shouldn't live for for material rewards in this life, we are looking for rewards in the next life and, as long as those rewards are coupled with approval from God, as Lewis beautifully does in the Weight of Glory, then no problem. But I do wonder if seeking God for God's sake actually sets some people on the difficult path of trying really hard to do things just for God.

This would probably loom less large for me as a criticism if it weren't for Keller's disappointing statements on pp. 72-74: "the clearest symptom of this lack of assurance is a dry prayer life. Though elder brothers may be diligent in prayer, there is no wonder, awe, intimacy, or delight in their conversations with God. ... The deeper the love relationship the more the conversation heads toward the personal, and toward affirmation and praise. Elder brothers may be disciplined in observing regular times of prayer, but their prayers are almost wholly taken up with a recitation of needs and petitions, not spontaneous joyful praise. In fact, many elder brothers, for all their religiosity, do not have much of a private prayer life at all unless things are not going well in their lives. Then they devote themselves to a great deal of it, until things get better again. This reveals that their main goal in prayer is to control their environment rather than to delve into an intimate relationship with a God who loves them." D'oh.

Again on pp. 122-123: "You must sense on the palate of the heart, as it were, the sweetness of his mercy. Then you will know you are accepted. ... You must see, with eyes of the heart, his dazzling majesty. Then you will know he has things in hand. Is it really possible to have this kind of experience? Some people find this more difficult than others, because they are of a more rational, controlled temperament. Other people, I believe, are so hungry for mystical experiences that they read every intuition and strong feeling as a "Word from the Lord." In short, most of us are too eager or not eager enough for what Jesus offers."

Grrrr. Give me C.S. Lewis any day of the week: "Even genuinely religious emotion is only a servant. No soul is saved by having it or damned by lacking it. The love we are commanded to have for God and our neighbour is a state of the will, not of the affections (though if they ever also play their part so much the better)."

On the other hand, my favorite passage is one that should put people who are nervous that Evangelicalism is going to lead to fat and satisfied Evangelicals. This paragraph is exactly what our anti-gnosticism should promote:

"A meal is a very physical experience. Jesus left a meal, the Lord's Supper, to be remembered by, and the final goal of history is a meal, the wedding supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19). The resurrected Christ ate with his disciples when he met with them (Luke 22:42-43; John 21:9). What does it all mean? It is a sign that, for Jesus, this material world matters. The book of Genesis tells us that when God made the world he looked upon the physical creation and called it "good." He loves and care for the material world. The fact of Jesus' resurrection and the promise of a new heaven and new earth show clearly that he still cares for it. This world is not simply a theater for individual conversion narratives, to be discarded at the end when we all go to heaven. No, the ultimate purpose of Jesus is not only individual salvation and pardon for sins but also the renewal of this world, the end of disease, poverty, injustice, violence, suffering, and death. The climax of history is not a higher form of disembodied consciousness but a feast. God made the world with all its colors, tastes, lights, sounds, with all its life-forms living in interdependent systems. It is now marred, stained, and broken, and he will not rest until he has put it right."

A lot of people complain that Presbyterianism is intellectualism. This is partially true, but I have found that at its heart Presbyterianism is just Evangelicalism with a heritage, and Keller has clearly drunk from that stream.

Devin says

Nearly every Christian knows, in an obvious way, that he most repent of his rebellious sin and loose living. But, repenting of good works? This is almost completely foreign. Good works are what Christians are supposed to pursue, right? How can they be a bad thing?

In this book, Tim Keller excellently demonstrates how good works without a proper gospel foundation are damnable before God. Keller elaborates on what he calls "Elder Brother-ness," referring to the elder brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son found in Luke 15:11-32. After breaking the parable into two acts, Keller examines the root heart issues in each brother's story and how each desperately needs God's grace, grace which God dispenses prodigally on his children.

This book is for church people, and I know many church people who need it. From the super-rigid Reformed folks to the light-hearted Charismatics, all believers have much to gain from reading Keller's work. I was both encouraged and convicted through the entire read. Definitely a winner here.

Greg Balzer says

If you think something is wrong with today's Christianity, and you can't exactly put your finger upon the specific problem, then this may very well be a book that provides profound insight. If I had more time I

would try to draw out the distinctions between authentic Christianity and its impostors, but let me share a single quote to give you the flavor of this book:

The gospel of Jesus is not religion or irreleigion, morality or immorality, moralism or relativism, conservatism or liberalism. Nor is it something halfway along a spectrum between two poles - it is something else altogether.

The gist of the book is that the elder son in the parable, the one who faithfully followed the father's directions was just as selfish, sinful and self-centered as the spendthrift younger son who demanded his inheritance early and squandered it in licentious living. There is not only one lost son in this parable, but two. Each son rebelled, one by being very bad, the other by being very good. You can be alienated from God either by breaking his rules or keeping all of them diligently. It is a shocking message, but timely.

Jason Sixsmith says

Like many people, I assumed the word prodigal meant "wayward or wasteful." So when Timothy Keller's book first hit the book shelves, I remember looking at the front cover, noticing the "NY Times Bestseller" sticker on the label and thinking to myself, "Bah, this must be another self-help 'spiritual' book about a god who wants to be in a relationship with man in order to bless him but needs some help finding his way." But after noticing this book under the arms of men whose faith I admire and seeing it distributed with the Angel Tree gifts our church sent out last Christmas, giving the book further investigation seemed like a wise choice.

Keller's book starts out by clarifying the definition of prodigal—1) recklessly extravagant, and 2) having spent everything—which gives understanding for the book's title, *The Prodigal God*. He then puts the story in context with the rest of the chapter of Luke, noting that this parable is Jesus' response to the grumbling Pharisees and scribes around him and that Christ starts the story by saying, "There was a man who had two sons." By the end of the first chapter, I realized that Timothy Keller's careful handling of Biblical exegesis would not allow this book to just be another dry re-hashing of a wayward son who wound up gnawing on pig feed because of his disobedience to God, and the reader can come away with more than just the knowledge that God is rich in mercy and grace no matter what we've done.

Keller goes on to lay a solid foundation to the story by drawing attention to the fact that the older brother does not enter into the feast at the end of the parable. So what we have is two lost sons; the moralistic older brother who follows all the rules, trying to merit his father's good graces, as well as the wayward and reckless younger brother. These are two personalities everybody can identify with; and apart from walking in God's grace, these two brothers represent the way in which man alienates himself from God.

Our society is divided into two cultures, as Keller points out. The culture of the "older brother" is the conventional moral conformist, commonly known for "stability" as well as striving to please authority figures. The "younger brother" culture lives by their own rules, walking a path of self-discovery. Every person gravitates to one of these two categories, and some combine the two. Both cultures proclaim, "If those people would follow our example, the world would be a better place." Our problem is that, no matter what side of the cultural divide we land on, we still play the role of the two lost sons, alienating ourselves from the Father by a self-centered focus on either keeping all the rules or breaking them all.

Within every person's heart is a hunger for home. *The Prodigal God* seeks to show us there is no satisfaction in our own efforts and pursuits to fill that longing with the things of this world since they are only here to

serve as signs and reminders pointing to the feast—Christ's saving work. If you want a deeper understanding of how we live next to the feast without entering or wander far from it, and if you want a better idea of what this feast looks like, then I recommend reading this book.

Tessa says

This tiny book conveys deep truths in a way that would be easy for just about anyone to follow. It serves as a great reminder of the costly grace Jesus has offered us, and what that grace means as we pursue salvation.
