

The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith

by Timothy Keller
Dutton: New York

Timothy Keller is pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church (PCA), Manhattan. Keller's *The Prodigal God* is essentially an extended sermon on Jesus' parable of the lost son. Keller seeks to take us to the heart of Christianity by taking us to the heart of Jesus' parable.

Just as Jesus' parable shares with us two sons, Keller writes with two particular audiences in mind. "This book is meant to lay out the essentials of the Christian message, the gospel. It can, therefore, serve as an introduction to the Christian faith for those who are unfamiliar with its teachings or who may have been away from them for some time" (xi). There is an apologetic quality to the book as Keller appeals to those who are outside the church. In particular, he seems to be focusing on those some call the "de-churched." He invites those who have left organized Christianity to ponder what it was they really left behind when they put "the father's house" far behind them. In many of these de-churched people – especially many whom he has met as a parish pastor in New York – Keller sees the younger son of Jesus' parable.

But Keller also writes for a church audience. "This volume is not just for seekers, however. Many lifelong Christian believers feel they understand the basics of the Christian faith quite well and don't think they need a primer. Nevertheless, one of the signs that you may not grasp the unique, radical nature of the gospel is that you are certain that you do" (xi). In particular, as the book develops, he asks those within the church to ponder how easily we can begin to substitute our own outward morality as an alternate "gospel" rather than putting our hope in Jesus. For those within the church there is a constant temptation to think like the self-righteous older son.

But Keller does much more than call our attention to the two sons in the parable. As the title of the book indicates, Keller urges us to pay attention most of all to the father who proves himself truly prodigal (lavish) in seeking both lost sons. In addition, Keller asks us to ponder the true seeking older brother who is missing from this parable (though such a seeking one is found in the two previous parables in Luke 15). Keller holds before the readers the true older brother, Jesus, who pays the price required so that the heavenly Father's grace might flow prodigally to younger and older sons alike.

There is much that makes this book worth the quick read that it is (133 pages). In chapter 3 (Redefining Sin) Keller cuts to the heart of the sinful self-focus that lurks in the hearts of both sons. At work in each son is "the radical self-centeredness of the human heart" (60).

Keller also identifies the critical importance of making "a clear distinction between the gospel and religious moralism" (69). As our sin-tolerant society moves further and further into what many call a post-Christian era, the danger will grow that messages about outward morality will be confused with the heart of the gospel message.

There is an outstanding section on pages 113ff (Salvation Is Individual) that shares why growth in sanctified living comes only as we daily "feed on the gospel" (115). If the references to the sacraments (Lord's Supper) near that same section (106, 113) recognized them as more than a "sign" that "represents," this section would have been even stronger.

Overall, the book is a helpful read for those looking for ways to speak the gospel in language that is neither stiff nor dusty. Keller illustrates well how to make the most of the fresh and vivid gospel pictures of this parable to share the message of law and gospel in a way that is devoid of religious jargon. The book could

also prove useful as an evangelism tool with the hope of starting up more extended conversations with unchurched friends and neighbors.

However, as much as this reviewer enjoyed this book, there is a troubling flaw. A reader could easily draw two false conclusions that could turn the book from blessing to bane.

First, there were several places where a believer with a sensitive conscience might easily conclude that anyone struggling with older-brother-self-righteousness may in fact not be numbered among “real, gospel believing Christians” (70). Later he adds, “It is only when you see the desire to be your own Savior and Lord – lying beneath both your sins and your moral goodness – that you are on the verge of understanding the gospel and becoming a Christian indeed” (70). While some might argue that the latter statement is intended for the de-churched audience, the word “indeed” at the end of the sentence suggests otherwise.

Calling me to repentance for self-righteous arrogance is one thing, doing so in a way that leaves the vague impression that I may only be fooling myself about being a Christian “indeed” is quite another. The former prepares me daily to hear again of the true elder brother who paid for my debt of pride. Despite the pain of seeing how easily I can be lured into self-righteous thinking, such godly sorrow (2 Corinthians 7:10) leaves me unharmed because it prepares me to look outside myself to my true elder brother, Jesus. But pointing out self-righteousness lurking in my heart and then allowing the implication to linger that I may not be a “real” believer easily sends me on an internal hunt for faith that can end in despair. The hardest thing for a believer to believe is that he believes.

The second problem is related to the first. The doubt-filled individual hunting expedition through my own heart for evidence of being a “real” believer easily morphs into a group hunt as I begin to doubt the reality of the faith of others. Statements like this are behind this second concern: “If our churches aren’t appealing to younger brothers, they must be more full of elder brothers than we’d like to think” (16). A similar statement appears near the book’s conclusion, “I have explained in this book why churches – and all religious institutions – are often so unpleasant. They are filled with elder brothers” (125).

Is the devil at work to sow weeds wherever God is at work to sow wheat? Jesus assures us this is true (Matthew 13:24f). But such warnings of Scripture are meant most of all to humble me, not to encourage me to don my hypocrite-hunting-waders so as to ascertain how “full of elder brothers” any particular congregation of professing believers may be. Yes, to be fair, in one place Keller notes that many in the church may only be “elder brotherish” (70) rather than full blown hypocrites. But the seed of doubt about others is planted several times before and after that distinction is made. While remembering the de-churched audience may explain the wisdom of acknowledging the damage hypocrisy has done in the church, to overstate the case is healthy neither for those inside or outside the church.

Both false conclusions revolve around a single pole: the book nowhere sets forth clearly the ongoing dual nature of the believer this side of heaven. Until the day we die, each of us remains simul justus et peccator. It would have been good for Keller to point out clearly that until death every believer will remain both a recovering younger brother and a recovering older brother. What this author longed to read is the clarity Jaroslav Vajda caught so well in his hymn (“In Hopelessness and Near Despair”) when he wrote:

I see my heart’s condition now,
My heart’s diverse affections.
Why do I love the things I loathe;
I’m torn in two directions:
Now prodigal, now Pharisee,
O God be merciful to me;
Who else but you can help me?
(Christian Worship Supplement, 738:3)

Christians who know their heart's condition are well aware how agonizingly easy it is to fall into younger or elder brother like thinking (and acting!). With natural hearts that are "deceitful above all things and beyond cure" (Jeremiah 17:9), these twin dangers can rear both their ugly heads within seconds of each other.

In the final analysis, this book's strengths outweigh its weaknesses. But this is the advice this reviewer is gluing into the front cover of this book as he gives it as a gift to his own children:

Mom and I are sharing this book with you because we have found it helpful in showing the sinful foolishness of our own hearts and the lavish love of our heavenly Father that is ours in Jesus.

As you read this book, remember this: until believers go home to heaven, we will all be troubled daily by our natural hearts that know how to get us to think (and act!) both like the younger brother and like the older brother.

But be careful, sometimes the book gives the impression that to struggle with such younger or older brother thinking means we may not be "real" Christians. Just as bad, some statements in the book might seem to encourage you to form judgments whether other confessing Christians are "real." That there are hypocrites in the church is a biblical truth. But God has not called us to estimate how many there are or affix particular names to the list.

As you read, instead of doubting your own faith or the faith of others, recognize the reality of the spiritual struggles we all face to defy our heavenly Father by the arrogance either of careless sinning or self-satisfied morality. But, most of all, be amazed again at the immeasurable grace of our "prodigal God."