

# Hands of the Father

BY WILLIAM D. SHIELL

**No one will be able to snatch us out of his Father's hand, Jesus said. The hands of God welcome us with a loving embrace when we return. Indeed, God's posture is so different from the way society teaches us to use our hands—to clasp ever more tightly to possessions and people.**

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*Luke 15:11-32*

**T**wo brothers: one older, one younger. The younger, setting off on the journey of a lifetime, treats his father as no better than dead. He treats Dad like a banker signing over the boy's inheritance. The younger brother leaves for the life he wanted, the alternative lifestyle, the conduct that we see on television. The father can only wave goodbye.



"That's what little brothers do, that's what spoiled brats do," Jesus' first listeners are thinking. "They don't know the sacrifices others have made, they take them for granted. They didn't have it as hard as we did."

The story is so familiar to them. They remember another pair of estranged brothers, Jacob and Esau—the younger brother, Jacob, flees after cheating Esau out of the inheritance; and father Isaac remains blind to the brothers' anger and hostility. They recall ten brothers ganging up on young Joseph and selling him into slavery, while their father Jacob mourns the loss of his favorite son. They think of those royal sons, Absalom and Adonijah. This time the older Absalom kills Adonijah and carries out a coup to dethrone King David, and all they can hear is the royal father's sobbing for the son who betrayed him.

For Jesus' first Jewish audience, the Parable of the Prodigal Son is an old, familiar story about brothers and their father's tears for them.<sup>1</sup>



By the time the younger son realizes what he has done, he has only carob beans to eat. But he cannot have them because the new boss says the pods are for the pigs. He cannot even get the boss to give him pigs' food – how's that for Jewish luxury dining? Those same hands that seized the inheritance as fast as they could are filled with the dirt of swine.

"He comes to himself," Jesus says, and goes back to his father with speech in hand. Surprisingly the father, though he had been rejected by his younger son, now welcomes him home. He embraces his son and invites him to work for him.

Toward the second son the father is just as gracious. The older son is in the field, working hard, slaving away like a hired hand. He is much more than that of course: he stayed home when Daddy worried, and he labored in the field. Now he proudly states how much he has done for everyone else. He's waited for the runt to return after squandering the family fortune. And we're not surprised at the father's reaction: he extends his arms to the older son too, saying, "All that is mine is yours as well."



One thread that weaves the story together is the use of hands: the father's hands waving to his lost son, the son's hands picking up the beans to make a meal for himself, the hands of the father embracing one son and inviting the other to join the party, and the elder brother likely replying angrily by crossing his arms.

Rembrandt van Rijn depicted this thread best in his famous painting, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. Long lines still form at the Hermitage in St. Petersburg to see the original. A church member gave me a print of this piece, and it hangs on my office wall.

Whenever I glance at the image during a meeting or counseling session, I notice the hands. The light falls on the hands of the father embracing the son. They are disproportionately larger than the other parts of the father's body. They remind me of the love that flows from a father's hands outstretched to a wayward son.

For the artist, the painting represented his life. Rembrandt spent a good portion of his life like the prodigal. His artistic success at age thirty was followed soon by grief, misfortune, and financial crisis. Within seven years he lost to death a son, a daughter, a second daughter, and his wife. The paint-

This photograph is  
available in the print  
version of *Parables*.

*Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn (1606-1669). THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL SON, 1668-1669. Oil on canvas, 265 x 205 cm. The Hermitage, St. Petersburg, Russia. Photo: © Scala / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.*

ing is a self-portrait: the artist is the old man, the father; but he is also the young prodigal kneeling at the feet of the father. The focus for Rembrandt, however, is the hands.<sup>2</sup>



The Psalmist uses the imagery of angels' hands to explain how God sustains us (91:12). Isaiah announces that God engraves his people on his palms (49:16). Jesus said that no one will be able to snatch us out of his Father's hand (John 10:29). In the parable and the painting, the hands of God welcome us with a loving embrace when we return.

God's posture is so different from the way society teaches us to use our hands—to clasp ever more tightly to possessions and people. If we have money, we clutch it. If we have a retirement account, we build it as large as we can and keep it for ourselves. We do the same with relationships. A boyfriend smothers a girlfriend with jealousy because he is afraid of losing her. A father does not want to see a daughter take the first steps into freedom, so he holds her fast.

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God, however, does not grab us as if we were about to jump out of the nest or hold us down to keep us from falling. He gently sustains us so that we can have the freedom to choose. The hands that welcome us back are the hands that wave goodbye when he knows we will land in the pig sty. The hands that embrace us are also the hands that let go long enough so that we can learn true love. These are God's kind of hands: they hold us but don't control us.

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When we understand the way that God holds us, we are less likely to attempt to control others. When we trust God, we more easily release our possessions, the relationships that we call our own, and the people we try to conform to our wishes. God says, "If you'll hold tight to me, I'll help you find the true freedom that comes from love. You won't have to hold on so tight to the relationships of this world if you'll cling to my life in my way."<sup>3</sup>

Craig Barnes writes of a learning experience he had with an engaged couple he was counseling. Jeff looked at his fiancée Beth and said, "I just have to get something off my chest. I'm terrified.... I'm not afraid of being married to you. I'm afraid of losing you. When my mother died it took me years and years to recover, and I still miss her like crazy. I just can't stand the thought of losing you as well."

Barnes wanted to reply, "You're young; don't worry about it; you have a bright future ahead, and that's a long way off." But that would have only made things worse. He knew that when we are madly in love, we grasp harder to those we love. We grip them tighter and tighter; and when we must let go of that person, we tend to blame God for our loss. Barnes told the young couple that they needed to release each other symbolically to God and live each day as if it were their last. In doing so, true love and devotion could begin. He told them to give each other to God now and hold the other with open hands, rejecting a feeling of entitlement to the other. Then they

could live in gratitude for each day they had.<sup>4</sup>

When did the father in Jesus' story decide he was going to let go of the son? In my view, it was long before the son left. When the son decided to take his inheritance, the father was willing to let him go. When the son returned, the father received him and generously extended love to one who had been entrusted to him a second time.



Rembrandt depicts the moment of the son's return. The father generously clothes his son with a robe, the true sign of restored status. He offers him a new pair of shoes. He gives him a ring—from his hand. The father's hands brought him there, released him, and demonstrated love.

Our choice is simple. Either we hold open hands under the ones we love, or our hands become calloused from trying to control others.

You probably noticed the hands of everyone else in the painting. While the father embraces the younger son and he, in turn, clings to his father, the older brother stands to the far right, dressed like a Pharisee (ironically) with his hands and arms folded. Another man sits with his arms proudly folded. They are afraid to love as the father does.

They represent the choice that is ours. When we understand how God holds us, we can extend that kind of freedom and sustain one another with the hands of the father.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1989), 112. I am also grateful for the insights from John Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34*, Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 35b (Waco, TX: Word Books: 1993), 780-791, and Alan Culpepper, "Luke," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume 9 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 300-305.

<sup>2</sup> I follow Henri Nouwen's classic reflection on the painting and parable, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (New York: Doubleday), 31-32.

<sup>3</sup> Kyle Matthews expresses this sentiment in the lyrics of "Hold on Tight" on the CD *Sing Down* (© See for Yourself Music, 2002), available online at [www.kylematthews.com](http://www.kylematthews.com).

<sup>4</sup> M. Craig Barnes, *Sacred Thirst: Meeting God in the Desert of our Longings* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 60-61.



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