

Family ties: Reading the story of the prodigal son in Turkey

by [Ryan Keating](#) in the [March 11, 2008](#) issue

The parable of the prodigal son came to have new meaning for me after I preached on the passage in a small Christian church in Turkey. I am an American ministering to a small Turkish congregation made up mostly of believers and seekers from a Muslim background.

Ours is one of many relatively new fellowships in this country that embrace the Christian faith and express it in genuinely Turkish ways. Since more than 99 percent of the population of Turkey is Muslim, living a life devoted to following Jesus in this place offers unique challenges. There is also unique privilege, however, in seeing the gospel lived out in this context and in experiencing the Good News through the lives of my Turkish brothers and sisters.

This Christian family related to the parable of the prodigal son in ways that I had not foreseen. People seemed to feel the impact that the first-century audience must have felt, and to identify with the parable's original audience in a way that I had only been able to imagine.

My Turkish friends identified immediately, for example, with the significance of an older and a younger son. In Turkish families birthright still carries meaning; older sons are called *abi* (big brother) by their younger siblings and have distinctive privileges and responsibilities. Insisting on one's inheritance prematurely is wrong; the fact that in this story it is the younger son who demands the inheritance adds to the offense. These listeners could relate to the shame and stigma that such a situation would create, and imagine the way the neighbors would talk as they wondered what really happened at that house.

There is also deep significance in a younger son leaving home while his father and brother carry on the family responsibilities. Turkish sons typically leave home only to marry, and even then they don't usually go very far. The sense of responsibility and connection to family as a source of identity is too strong to be abandoned for selfish

pursuits.

My congregants could read meaning into the famine that the younger son experienced after having spent his entire inheritance frivolously. Our city in Turkey is in the throes of a serious water shortage, and we have gone without running water for days at a time. The reaction of the Turkish mayor was to call for public prayers for rain in the traditional Muslim fashion. Thousands gathered to petition God for deliverance, and Turkish churches followed suit by praying for rain in their own services. It was a similar shortage that drove the prodigal son to desperation and created an occasion for repentance.

His desperation reached a low point when he was reduced to accepting a job feeding pigs. In the Turkish imagination, no animal is more repugnant than a pig—a Turk might even apologize for mentioning the animal in conversation. So, to be responsible for caring for pigs is, for most Turks, absolutely unthinkable. As I described the boy's plight, the instinctive cringes and expressions of disgust revealed the depth of connection that these people have with this ancient culture.

And then there is the turning point. When the boy decided to set out for home, the congregation could sense the uncertainty about how this reckless, shameful son would be received. As a result, they were stunned by the father's response, and by the strength of love that motivated him to receive the prodigal back into his household. Borrowing some of Henri Nouwen's observations from his book *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, I described how the father must have waited every day for his son's return, pacing across his property and looking down the road for his lost boy. I sensed that my Turkish brothers and sisters could feel it with him: the anticipation, the tension, the paradox of waiting.

When I told of the father and son embracing, I watched the reactions and expressions of my brothers and sisters, many of whose families have rejected them as a result of their decision to set out on the Jesus road: the man whose wife won't allow him to bring their son to church; the wife whose husband brings her to church every week at her insistence and then sits outside to smoke alone; the son who secretly attends church meetings knowing that there would be serious consequences if his family knew he was associating with us. There is something powerful about the wholeness of the family depicted in the parable: it is a family held together not by obedience to law or tradition, but by the powerful love of the father. Many of my Turkish brothers and sisters dream about this kind of wholeness

for their own families.

The father's ceremony of receiving the younger son back into the family has unique points of connection for a Turkish audience. When the father commands the servants to "bring the best robe," the Turkish reader imagines more than just a new piece of clothing. While most Turks don't wear a kaftan (as it is expressed in Turkish) on the street, the robe is still worn for special ceremonies, particularly religious ones, as a reminder of Turkish heritage and the royal Ottoman household. Tourists can buy replicas of an antique Turkish kaftan in the bazaar. When the father says, "Bring the kaftan and put it on my son," he's referring to a symbol of status and distinction with spiritual significance. A Turkish hearer can imagine an elderly father tucking his own robe into his belt as he runs down the road to collect his wayward son.

The ring that the servant is commanded to put on the son's finger also resonates with a Turkish audience. Silver shops all over our city in Turkey sell signet rings with the mark of the Ottoman Empire. Under the empire, rings were used to seal important documents. Other kinds of rings still carry political and religious significance. The father's ring apparently carried the symbol of the father's household.

Turkish hearers can even identify with the idea of killing a fatted calf. During the festival of Kurban Bayram, an Islamic tradition calls for sacrificing an animal. Families slaughter a calf or other animal as an expression of devotion and thankfulness to God, honoring Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac. According to Islam, it was by providing a ram that God ransomed the life of his son. Many families sacrifice an animal in thankfulness for a request that's been granted. All of my Turkish hearers have seen the sacrifice performed and have participated in celebrations that included the slaughtering of an animal; some of them have even held the knife as it cut through the throat of the goat or bull. When the prodigal son's father commanded that an animal be cut, he was expressing his gratitude to God for bringing his son back.

At least one woman in the service that day was hearing the parable for the first time. When she heard about this father who looks down his road and waits to embrace his lost son, she wept. All of us in the congregation could relate to the reality of having brought shame on our household by our rebellion and squandering of the Father's wealth in wild living. Yet there is a robe and a ring and a fatted calf waiting, and a Father who will embrace us. He insists on vesting us with the family

name, and welcomes us into his house as sons and daughters.