



## **Luke 15:1-3, 11-32**

### **“WHO’S THE PRODIGAL?”**

(Sermon Plus Study And Application Questions)

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**“Following Christ at City Center!”**

## **I. LUKE 15:1-3, 11-32 (RSV)**

**(As the text appears in your modern Bibles)**

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

So he told them this parable: And he said, "There was a man who had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that falls to me.' And he divided his living between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living. And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants."' And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to make merry.

"Now his elder son was in the field; and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what this meant. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound.' But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, 'Lo, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!' And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"

## **II. SCRIPTURE SHEET AND SERMON**

**(As the text was heard by ancient hearers)**

LUKE 15:1-3, 11-32 "WHO'S THE PRODIGAL?"

**1. 15:1-3 SETTING: JESUS AT TABLE WITH OUTCASTS.** Parallel to Mk. 2:15-17

(Worked for Rome) (Not keep law, forbidden occupations, including shepherding!) Guests Honor Host

- 1 Now the *tax collectors* and *sinner*s were *all* drawing near to *hear him*. Positive Attraction To Jesus (Lk.7:29-30, 14:35)
- 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, Negative Reaction To Jesus  
 "This man *receives* (i.e. "hosts") sinners and eats with them." Accusation Over Table Habits (5:30, 7:34)
- 3 So he told them this parable: Jesus Defends His Conduct With Three Stories: (vv.3-7, 8-10, 11-32)  
Jesus Claims To Act Out The Mind Of God

**2. 15:11-32 THE PARABLE OF THE TWO SONS AND THE LOVING FATHER.**

11 And he (i.e. Jesus) said, "There was a man who had two sons; One Story For Each Son (11-24, 25-32)

**a) 15:11-24 The Younger Prodigal Who Strayed (Twelve 3-Line Stanzas; Resolved In End).**

- 12 1) and the younger of them said to his Father, SON IS LOST Expect Father To Refuse  
 "Father, give me the share of property that falls to me." Treats Father As Already Dead  
 And he divided his living between them. On Property : Sir. 33:19-21, 23  
Violates Ex. 20:12, Dt. 5:16
- 13 2) Not many days later the younger son sold all he had, GOODS WASTED IN  
 journeyed into a far country DESTRUCTIVE LIVING  
 and wasted his property in extravagant living. Overt Sinner
- 13 3) And when he has spend everything EVERYTHING LOST  
 a great famine arose in that country,  
 and he began to be in want.
- 15 4) So he went and joined himself Unclean Animals  
 to one of the citizens of that country THE GREAT SIN:  
 and he sent him to his fields to feed pigs. FEEDING PIGS  
FOR GENTILES
- 16 5) And he would gladly have eaten the pods TOTAL  
 which the pigs ate, REJECTION  
 and no one gave him anything.
- 17 \*6) But when he came to himself he said,  
 "How many of my Father's servants have bread to spare,  
 but I perish here with hunger. CHANGE
- 18 \*6') I will arise and go to my father and say to him, REPENT  
 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you  
 and am no more worthy to be called your son; make me a servant.'"
- 20 5') And he arose and came to his father. TOTAL  
 And while he was at a great distance his father saw him, ACCEPTANCE  
 and had compassion and ran and embraced him and kissed him. Sir.19:30  
Kiss =Forgiveness
- 21 4') And the son said to the father, THE GREAT  
 "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you REPENTANCE:  
 and am no more worthy to be called your son." "I HAVE SINNED...."
- 22 3') And the father said to the servants, EVERYTHING  
 "Bring the best robe and put it on him, RESTORED Robe = Honor  
 and put a ring on his hands and shoes on his feet. Ring = Authority  
Shoes = No Slave Status
- 23 2') And bring the fatted calf and kill it GOODS USED IN JOY  
 and let us eat AND CELEBRATION  
 and make merry. Feast = Sign Of Joy
- 24 1') For this my son was dead and is alive, SON FOUND Image Of Resurrection  
 he was lost and is found."  
 And they began to make merry.

**b) 15:25-32 THE OLDER PRODIGAL WHO STAYED (Eight 3-line stanzas, Unresolved Ending).**

- 25 1) Now the elder son was in the fields, **HE COMES TOWARDS HOUSE**  
 and as he came and drew near to the house he heard music and dancing **Covert Sinner**  
 26 and he called one of the boys and asked what this meant.
- 27 2) And he said to him, "*Your brother* has come **BROTHER SAFE**  
 and your father has killed the fatted calf **FEAST**  
 because he received him with peace."
- 28 3) But he was angry and refused to go in **FATHERS COMES OUT**  
 so his father came out **TO RECONCILE**  
 and was entreating him. **No Title: Insult**
- 29 \*4) But he answered his father, "Lo these many years I have served you,  
 and I have never disobeyed your commandments, **COMPLAINT I**  
 yet you never gave me a kid to make merry with my friends. **TREAT ME CHEAPLY**
- 30 \*4') But when *this son of yours* came **COMPLAINT II:**  
 who has devoured your living with harlots, **TREAT HIM KINDLY**  
 you killed for him the fatted calf." **Disowns Brother**
- 31 3') And he said to him, "Beloved Son,  
 you are always with me **FATHER SEEKS**  
 and all that is mine is yours. **TO RECONCILE**
- 32 2') It was fitting to make merry and be glad **BROTHER SAFE**  
 for your brother was dead and is alive, **A FEAST**  
 he was lost and is found."

1') NO MATCHING PARALLEL STANZA.

**? = DID HE COME INTO THE HOUSE?**

**(THE STORY ENDS PREMATURELY. IT'S LEFT OPEN-ENDED ON PURPOSE.)**

**YOU (THE HEARER) MUST SUPPLY THE MISSING ENDING AND IT REVEALS YOUR HEART!.**

<b>IS IT ENDING NO. 1, A COMEDIC HAPPY ENDING?</b>	
1')	And the elder son changed his mind and entered the house <b>HE COMES INTO THE HOUSE</b> and joined in the music and the dancing, and the father rejoiced in both his sons and the grace they received.
<b>OR, ENDING NO. 2, A TRAGIC ENDING?</b>	
1')	And the elder brother remained outside <b>HE DOES NOT COME TO THE PARTY</b> and seethed in anger and bitterness towards his brother and his father also. And the father's heart was grieved, for a son was still lost.

**Can You Rejoice In Jesus' Ministry Of Welcoming The Lost?**

**If Not, Why Not?**

**Could it be that you have never been found,  
 or that do not know you are lost,  
 or that you have lost the joy of your salvation in conventional religion?**

(The reconstruction of the structure of this two-stanza parable is based on the work of Dr. Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant A Literary-Cultural Approach To the Parables In Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 142-206.

## WHO'S THE PRODIGAL?

*"But when he came to himself..."*

Illumination by the Holy Spirit is where conversion begins.

L U K E 1 5 : 1 7 a

**L**egends embody the ideals of a culture; they tell us who is worthy of praise and who of blame. I think of Paul Bunyan and his famous blue ox Babe from the lore of the great Northwest, or of George Washington and the cherry tree. True Americans- our legends say- are pioneers like Bunyan; and- like the boy who became father of our country- tell no lies. Legends instruct the young in virtue and remind us all of our duties. An old Asian story tells of a man with a wild and impetuous son:

“The boy once became involved with the village ruffians who persuaded him to join them in a robbery of his own father's treasury house. After the robbery was over, his friends fled with the loot and left him to face the guilt alone. He betrayed his father, but his greatest crime was to bring public dishonor on the family name. In a culture where ancestors are worshiped and family integrity is sacred, this was worst of all.

Broken and repentant, he went and begged forgiveness. Graciously, it was granted. The father then called all the family together to celebrate the reconciliation of his son. When all had enjoyed the banquet, the father stood and raised a cup of rice wine for a toast. As the son drained his cup, he grabbed his throat and fell dead across the table. He'd been poisoned.

With ceremonial dignity, the father nodded to the guests. Each in turn politely bowed as they silently left the banquet hall. All was now put right. The son paid the price of his pardon with death. Family honor was reestablished. The unfortunate incident was now closed.”<sup>1</sup>

A son who heard this story told by his grandfather would understand immediately:

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<sup>1</sup> Edited from Richard Carol Hoefler, *And He Told Them a Story* (C.S.S. Publishing, 1979).

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“We are a people with ideals of high honor, strict justice and family duty. You are dispensable; honor and duty are not. Everything has a price tag- including forgiveness, and we will lie, even kill you, if you break the code.”

Such tales are powerful conveyers of boundaries and limits, and they are one way to tame impetuous young men, which is a daunting task in every culture. In an increasingly fatherless culture like ours where gangs and peers too often replace absent parents, it’s a big issue. Our prisons are largely warehouses for young men who failed to find a set of responsible tracks to run on. Boy Scouts help, as do coaches and sports, perhaps a youth leader or pastor, even a Parris Island drill instructor, but nothing replaces a dad who knows and walks with God. We all know that young men (and increasing young women) without guidance are dangerous, and that even those with love and boundaries are not immune from immoral and destructive decisions. I often deal with the casualties.

We have in Luke a story with a similar plot. A adventuresome son makes a bad decision to seek the company of the wrong crowd. Life at home looks stodgy compared with life on the road. Soon abandoned by new friends and reduced to desperation, he comes to himself in a pig sty and heads home. Bloated with shame and guilt, he’s a pitiful sight. He stinks in more ways than one: a young fool who’s blown his fortune and future, abandoned family and faith, a loser in every way, a bum. To his utter surprise, he is welcomed home by his father’s joy; a party is thrown to celebrate his return. And- in the strange logic of the kingdom of God where there are no shortages or permanent losses- all is restored. New shoes, custom suit, a signet ring that speaks of restored status and financial power. Who pays for our forgiveness? In the Asian story, the guilty pay. In our story, Jesus pays. Which world do you live in? Which world do you believe in? The Asian legend is one option, the parable of Jesus another. Which is the real world?

**A Controversial Dinner Party (15:1-3)**

The holiness of Jesus was attractive. He pulsed with life. Immoral people, irreligious people, broken and lonely people, the spiritually tormented and left-out all felt drawn to him, if not altogether comfortable in his presence. Here was a man unlike other leaders. He exuded the mercy and forgiveness of God. He told stories that illumined their lives. He ate and drank with them, and for this behavior was labeled a *wine bibber and a glutton*.<sup>2</sup> He threw dinner parties and was criticized by the religious professionals who segregated themselves off from anyone who didn't meet the code of holiness by which they lived. Real holiness is never so fragile. It is robust and engaging, not pale and timid. Jesus came to take our sin and brokenness into himself, to fellowship with us in this low tavern of life so we

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 11:19.

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could feel the breath of God on the back of our necks. We cannot stain or pollute him, but he can cleanse and deliver us from the worst that's in us. Jesus is the open door into the hot heart of God. In him the Father is taking responsibility for our full restoration. This is what eating with Jesus meant; his opponents knew it and did not like it.

So in Luke 15 we find Jesus *receiving* sinners and eating with them, but it's more than a meal. For Jews the banquet was a common symbol for the kingdom of God, and in inviting these people Jesus is issuing invitations to forgiveness and a new relationship with God. Meals with Jesus were a laboratory of the kingdom he proclaimed, a foretaste of what heaven on earth will be like: a big party with Jesus picking up the tab. Like the push and pull of a magnet, sinners are drawn to Jesus like so many iron filings, while the Pharisees and scribes are repelled by the same worldly holiness. It frightens me to read that religious leaders were the ones Jesus had the most trouble with. They wanted to control access to God, and Jesus kept drawing outside their lines. Verse 1: "Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him" (that's attraction!). "And the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them'" (that's repulsion!). And where Jesus is welcomed and given freedom in his church, the same dynamic happens. Don't kid yourself. Were God to open heaven and send revival to this church, some would love it; others would hate it, just like then. Life in the kingdom draws some and offends others.

How would you respond? The leaders just branded you public enemy number one, "Stay away from Jesus. He will corrupt your morals." I'd sue for defamation. But Jesus loved his critics and reached out by means of a skillful story. And as we unfold the two scenes, remember the purpose is a defense by Jesus of his eating with tax collectors and sinners. He was an evangelist to the lost, the question being, *Who's lost?*

**The Prodigal Who Strayed (vv.11-24)**

The world's folklore is full of young men who leave home to seek their fortunes in answer to the question, How does the boy become a man? But there is little sense of high adventure in the story of the son who strayed. From the start he evokes strongly negative feelings. He must have been about sixteen or seventeen; most Jewish men married by eighteen, and he is not. But don't think of him as a late-stage teenager, and that's for two reasons. There were no teens as we understand them in those days, only children and adults with bar-mitzvah being the clear marker between childhood and manhood. One day a boy, the next day a man. Adolescence as we understand it is only a century and a half old. Also, the average life span was then only in the low-thirties. This is not a case of teenage rebellion. Our scoundrel is a full-fledged adult, halfway through what he might expect.

He goes to his father- a landed man, and asks for his inheritance. By law, the younger

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of two sons was entitled to a third of the estate.<sup>3</sup> Even if the father was to deed over the property, he retained the use of it until death as a sort of social security. This son apparently took advantage of his father's trust, had him divide the estate, and promptly turned the land into cash. He broke the commandment to honor his father and treated him as if he were dead. The village was scandalized. As far as they were concerned, he was now the dead one.

Watch him leave in his new Mustang GT, wallet fat with cash, headed for Vegas or another city where wine, women, and song are standard fare for young men seeking their fortunes. His sure did put one over on the old man. Adventure beckons; he wants to experience life away from the confines of home and family. Ever been there? “Get you motor runnin’, head out on the highway, looking for adventure, in whatever comes our way.” Steppenwolf’s *Born To Be Wild!* “There is a house in New Orleans, they call the Risin’ Son, and it’s been the ruin of many a poor boy, and Lord I know I’m one.” The Young Rascals ode to a bawdy house. High hopes and foolish naivete are a toxic combo. But who can correct a young fool? Perhaps only pain, or the grave, or maybe a spiritual awakening?

His movement is steadily downhill from his father's house through the sensual allurements of the world down to the door of death. If you like it, buy it! If it feels good, do it! It’s the Hugh Hefner, James Bond, frat-boy, *Animal House*, *Jersey Short* lifestyle. It’s alive among the young and old men of Greenwood, and it is spiritual suicide. Pitiably among the young, disgusting in the old. When we throw off restraint and give free reign to our appetites, the result is not life but death. Such fun looks good, but in the end utterly degrading. Such men are not hard to spot. Hollowed out, bored, thin-souled, unreliable, jaded, forever reprocessing a misspent youth, ignorant of God, not prepared to live or to die: everything you do not want to be. And then to have to face God?

Look with me into the bleary eyes of a dopehead who’s lost all motivation and can no longer coast on the family name. Visit the drunk in the detox unit as they tremble in DT’s and crave another shot. Sit down with the pretty college girl with an STD that may render her barren for life. Listen to her foolish anger at God, “How could he let this happen to me?” Talk to the man who has so many notches on his belt he’s lost the capacity to bond with any one woman in marriage. He thinks he’s a lover; I think he’s an empty shell. What will it be like when he’s old and lonely? It’s hard in a down economy to get a job with a prison record. Stand at the bedside of a young man as his momma wails as he dies of AIDs. They are not theoretical examples; names and faces are attached to each; I was there for every one. Sin in all its forms is a degrading path into bondage and a doorway into the demonic. Jesus saw it time and time again. The parable may be fiction, but the story line was repeated every day.

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<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 21:17.

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Our young fool journeyed to a far country, and there, Luke writes in verse 13, "...he wasted his property in extravagant living." He spent his cash and maxed out the credit cards just as a famine hit the land. He went from the high life to the low life, from *fare-thee-well* to *na'er-do-well*, from sports car to shoe leather, from gourmet to garbage cans, from satin sheets and blended whiskey to smelly mattresses and cigarette butts floating in stale beer in a by-the-hour motel run by a man with too much Brylcreem in his pompadour. He ran out of funds and friends and ran headlong into a famine. I am told he spent his last quarter in a video poker machine hoping for the rescue of a payoff. What a fool!

Only one step lower. Slopping the hogs of a Gentile. For a good Jewish boy, that's as low as it gets. Even the slop looked good, but he was forbidden to touch it, verse 16: "And he would gladly have eaten the pods which the pigs ate *and no one gave him anything.*"

My Granddaddy Turner, a tobacco farmer near Coward, had a slop-bucket in the corner of his kitchen. As a child I couldn't walk within ten feet of it without gagging. Sour milk, bacon grease, swollen stale biscuits and half rotten vegetables floating on top. Would I have eaten that stuff? Only if I was about to starve. Can you smell the pungent perfume of the pigs? Hear them grunt and see em' waller? This was his new digs. He worked for a Gentile herding unclean animals. He'd forfeited his Jewish faith and become as a pagan. As lost as you can be and still be alive. Busted and disgusted, degraded and deprived, destitute and despicable, the devil's young fool. He wasn't at the bottom, but he could see it from where he was. Ever been there? Good things can happen when the pain level gets high enough.

Thank God not everyone's bottom rung is at the same place. In fact, the bottom is sometimes moveable like an elevator. You cannot rescue people who don't want help (AA taught us that), but sometimes- through prayer and intervention- you can raise the bottom up to where they are rather than waiting for them to *splatter* all over the bottom of the shaft.

My bottom at age 18- bad as it felt at the time- was really rather shallow, even laughable. No criminal record, no DUI's or major addictions, no permanent injuries to body or mind, very little that could not be restored through simple repentance, forgiveness, and restitution, and that took about a year. God was merciful to a lost kid from a good home. But not all make it out of the pig pen. Some die there with their mom chanting, "But he was such a good boy." "Maybe so," I think to myself as I leave the graveside, "but he sho' was a rotten young man." Burying old saints is easy; burying young scoundrels is hard work.

Not all even know they're in a pig sty; some of the devil's holding pens are rather well decorated and perfumed: corporate boardrooms and European vacations- the good life as

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defined by *Conde Nast* and *Garden and Gun*.<sup>4</sup> There ‘s no cosmic requirement to wake up or grow up. Repentance is always the decision to respond to what God is doing, and spiritual maturity is the fruit of repenting a thousand times and staying with the process God orchestrates. I repent every day. It’s the only way to stay aligned. The stakes are just too high to get too far off course. I fear God, and if you do not, you are not in touch with reality.

There with the swine a moment of truth arrived. The grace of God broke through his thick skull and planted an idea. Pride took a beating, and the work of the Holy Spirit began to turn his heart towards home through an aching belly, verse 17: "But when he *came to himself*..." What a remarkable phrase. In a flash our foolish friend came to a penetrating recognition. How many times have I heard people say, "I just woke up one morning, and for the first time *I saw myself*." That is the preparatory and prevenient grace of God.<sup>5</sup> It is a miracle and the first step towards conversion. God lets us in on the truth just a bit to see if we notice. God holds up a mirror and whispers, "This is what I see. Do you like it?"

We cannot see ourselves clearly without the illumination of the Holy Spirit. Verse 17, "But when he *came to himself*, he said, 'How many of my fathers servants have bread to spare but I perish here with hunger?'" This was more here than a desire for a meal ticket. It was a glimpse of what sin is in all its destructive and degrading power. His natural desire as a young man to find his place in the big world beyond the family circle had been twisted by sin's power into the symbolic death of his father, the wasting of resources, a terrible loneliness, and the renouncing of his faith. It’s what Satan does. He doesn’t create anything; he only corrupts what is good, and until we see the ugly thing it is, we can’t turn away.

Sin is not just this or that isolated immoral act, even a pattern of the same. It is an enveloping perverse power that takes the desires of our hearts and uses them against us. It deceives and whispers, "Happiness is here. Follow me." All that came to an end amidst the oinking and stench of the swine, "I will arise and go to my father and say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you and am no more worthy to be called your son; make me a servant.'" So he dropped the slop bucket, swallowed pride, ate a bite of crow, turned his back on the far country, and began the long journey home. Not a pretty sight. He was a mess. But grace had found a grip and was tugging in the right direction.

Question: How comfortable are we with folk who are just beginning their way back

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<sup>4</sup> The owner of this magazine is a friend, and this reference is not a jab at his character! My point is that the good life is not necessarily the same as the God life.

<sup>5</sup> For a fresh treatment of prevenient grace, see Roger Olson, et. al., *Perspsective On The Doctrine of God* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2008), 167-172.

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to God? Is there a place for them at Main Street, or do they have to get *fixed-up* first? If we sing the hymn, “Just as I am, without one plea,” then we have to practice it together. And where are the evangelists among us to stand at the gates of pig pens with a word of hope?

One of the greatest gifts God gives any Christian is discernment, the insight to see where a person is and to cooperate with what the Spirit is doing in their life. We cannot rescue people from piggens if they’ve not yet *come to themselves*. But we can learn to spot folk who are beginning their way back to God and draw alongside them as a friend or coach. Is there someone in your office or your neighborhood in whom you sense the first glimmerings of a hunger for God? Perhaps it’s manifested as curiosity about church or an interest in some good work. Your job is not to save them, only to listen, pray, and help them find connections with other Christians who are credible. Trust the Spirit to draw them forward, and be patient. Be one of the way stations on their way back to the Father’s house. You don’t have to be the *last link* in the chain, but with God’s help you can be the *next link*.

Biblical scholars tell us the father's behavior in verse 20 is out of character. No self-respecting middle eastern man would be seen running towards such a son. Day by day the father looked down the road; then one day the prayer of his heart is answered. People in the village can't believe their eyes. The old man wraps his arms around his smelly son and covers him with kisses, shielding him against mockery. The boy manages to start his well-formed confession, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you and am no more worthy to be called your son...,” but before he offers his own solution of coming back as a slave he’s cut short by the father, "Bring my best robe. Put the family signet ring on his finger and shoes on his feet. This is no slave. This is my boy. There'll be a party tonight."

This is who God the Father is, says Jesus, one who welcomes strays and restores them to family status, one who raises the dead out of their sins. As Tony Campolo once said to a stadium full of men at a Promise Keeper’s rally, “God carries your picture in his wallet.” Day by day the Father looked and waited. What he did not do was go down to the pig pen with family money to make pig-pen living easier more pleasant.

It’s not smart for parents to continue paying for their children’s destructive lifestyles and legal bills, and I know some who’ve spent hundreds of thousands in an unending guilt tax. Keys to the beach or river house for weekend shackups was a big problem in Georgetown. Car insurance into their thirties. Ten years of college, still no degree. Sleeping in while you work. Parent’s who’d rather be liked than respected. Making excuses, never following through. Maybe if mom and dad got on the same page, something good might happen with Junior, or - as I’ve seen several times- there might be a funeral.

A good question is, Am I corrupting my children? Am I standing between them and God-designed consequences? At some point parents have to come to terms with the fact that

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their children are sinners with a will of their own, and- no matter how well you raised them- they may choose destruction. Finally we all answer to God alone. At the last judgment God's not going to speak to yo momma! Love never ends. Prayer never ends. But parenting has an expiration date, and here we see a wise father who waits in real pain and anticipation.

Notice what the Father does not do. He does not go with him to the pig-pen; he does not bail him out with more money; he doesn't blame himself for being a terrible father; he doesn't hire the boy a therapist to make weekly visits to the pig pen to boost his precious little self-esteem; he does not pay lawyer fees; he does not put his own life on hold; he doesn't allow his boy to bring the pig pen home. He waits in patient, tough love with no guarantee of results. There is no comfort in this story for parents who rescue their wayward children from natural consequences. He does not stop his son from leaving, and he does not beg to him stay to make his mother happy. Our freedom to destroy ourselves is no illusion. Not once does the father say, "If I had only...." Those little darlings you think so perfect are sinners like everyone else. They have free will, a genuine spiritual enemy bent on their corruption, and they may stubbornly defy everything you value. The best hope for parents is not that they *get it right all the time*, but that they have a living relationship with Jesus Christ so they can handle whatever happens, including the death of their child.

The story could have ended here. The prodigal home. The wound healed. The party begun. Joy in the household. But there was a second son, wasn't there?

**The Prodigal Who Stayed (vv.25-32)**

If I had to find a comparison for the older brother it would be good church folk who live more by duty and obligation than love. Loyal, hardworking, diligent, but you get the sense the passion of God's love has never moved below skin level. They spend most of their time secretly wishing everyone was as moral as they are so taxes could be lowered. They too are prodigals; you don't have to journey to a far country to sever a relationship with the Father.

Where do we find the older brother? Where we find most of us firstborn sons like Pastor Phil, working and trying hard to keep up the family name. He hears music and dancing. "What's going on?" A servant replies, "Your brother has come and your father has killed the baby beef and invited the village." Verse 28 reveals his heart, "But he was angry and refused to go in...." Beyond that he insulted his father, not once but twice:

"I work hard, and what do I get? Not even a goat! When this whoremongering son of yours comes home, you treat him like some sort of royalty. Is he stealing my inheritance? Did you act like him when you were young? Am I a better man than you, Dad?"

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## Luke 15:1-3, 11-32 ..... 13

It's not hard to see Jesus' taking a jab at the Pharisees and scribes here. At the center of the story of *the prodigal who strayed* is repentance; at the center of the older brother's tale is complaining. The older boy begrudges his father's mercy. He has lived in his father's house but is a stranger to his father's heart. His far country is under the same roof.

I've been a prodigal. I've been the elder brother, angry at God's mercy to scoundrels. As a pastor I've also had the joy of being the one who welcomes prodigals back home.

Who do you identify with? The older brother? Is respectability more important to you than the joy of forgiveness? Do you prefer a bookkeeper God to a God who raises the dead? Do you arrange your life so you don't have to spend time with prodigals? My concern is that this church, along with many others, often looks to outsiders like a collection of elder brothers and sisters whose lives are circumspect but whose hearts are cold. Are we willing to throw a kingdom party with Jesus, or are we a bunch of party-poopers? How could this church become user-friendly for people on their way back to God?

Before we write off the elder brother, we need to note the father's love for him as well. God loves those who are lost in the church as well as those who are lost in the world. He came out to him just like to the younger. Even after the insults he spoke kindly, "Beloved Son, you are always with me and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad for your brother was dead and is alive, he was lost and is found." Resurrection.

### Conclusion

The story ends with the responsible brother and father facing one another in silence. Jesus left the story unfinished as an invitation to put aside pride and join the party. Would you if you were the older brother? God is grieved when we wander into a far country and endure pain and humiliation before turning back towards home; God is equally grieved when good, religious folk miss the party. This wonderful, double parable reaches out to all: those who stray and those who stay. Will we love a God who raises the dead and heals sick religion?

During the hymn the altar is open for three kinds of people:

- 1) Those who used to be prodigals and want to thank God again for his grace.
- 2) Those who are prodigals now and need a place to begin the journey home.
- 3) Those who know a prodigal and want to pray for their homecoming.

No one will know which one you are. And if that bothers you, you have another problem. You care way too much what others think. You can pray in our seats as well, but if God has pierced your heart with his Word, please do something about it today!

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### III. STUDY QUESTIONS

#### 15:1-3

1. What was it about Jesus that made him so attractive to traitors, rascals, and sinners?
2. What was it that made Jesus such a threat to Jewish religious leaders?
3. What's wrong with a church of only religious people?
4. How is Jesus' story in vv.11-32 like throwing a hard right at his detractors?

#### 15:11-24

1. What's the best name for the story: prodigal son, prodigal sons, or the waiting father?
2. What do you make of the careful structure of the first half of the story?  
What is the contrast at the center in vv.16-17?
3. How did the son know what kind of prayer to pray? Lots of time in church maybe?
4. Have you ever been in or even near life in the pig-pen? How did you land there?
5. What made the son *come to himself* in v.17? What memory gave him hope?
6. What would it feel like to plan life as a slave and find yourself a son again?

#### 15:25-32

7. What is it about first-borns that makes them so diligent and critical?
  8. Any chance the older brother both hated and envied his younger brother?
  9. How is v. 29 an ugly revelation of the heart of the older brother? Is this you?
  10. Do you think v.30 is an accurate assessment of the younger son's character?
  11. Why did Jesus leave the story open-ended and unfinished?
  12. Which ending appeals to you? Are there any other endings you want to write?
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## IV. WHAT NOW? POSSIBLE ACTION STEPS

1. Do you know a prodigal? Are you praying for them? Showing them kindness?
2. How does it change your view of Jesus to see him as a skilled poet?
3. Write out a prayer of repentance for yourself modeled on v.21.
4. Who are you more like? The younger, or the older brother? The father?
5. Find a church that has a good track record with welcoming and transforming prodigals? Interview several and write a story about it.
6. What do you do with a God who raises the dead? Where are you still dead?

## V. A PRAYER FOR THE CHURCH

The Lord be with you. **And also with you.** Let us pray:

**Almighty God, our heavenly Father,  
working for good in this world of sin and evil,  
hear our confession as we humble ourselves before you.  
We have often believed the lie that life is better without you  
and that you are an impediment to our pleasures and freedom.  
We have believed the lie that sin is without consequences  
and that what others do not know about does not matter.  
We have looked down our noses at the drug addict and drunkard,  
the sexually immoral and those who have committed crimes.  
This also is sin and the pride that goes before a fall.  
We have forgotten how the blood of Christ first cleansed us,  
and how you so patiently taught us to walk in the truth.  
It is because of your great mercy shown to us in Jesus  
that we ask again for a flood of forgiveness and healing upon us all.  
Place in us a holy revulsion for all that is not of you.  
By the deep workings of your Holy Spirit  
make us a people who can welcome the sin-weary back home.  
Teach us to rejoice when you raise souls from the dead.  
Amen. (All pray in silence. Pardon is announced.)**

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