



## The Loving Father and the Prodigal Son

Luke 15:11-32

October 23, 2011

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On Wednesday night as we were praying, in the group that I was in, one of the people said, and I am paraphrasing “I don’t want to go back to normal. I don’t want to get back to the way things were. This is too good, too right, too important for us as a church and as individuals. It is hard, but it is good. We need this.” That was the heart of the group. I understand that sentiment. God is at work in us. He is at work in us, renewing our minds and our hearts in Him, renewing our affections and desires for Him, knitting our hearts to His and to one another – closer and closer. He is cutting away wrong thoughts of Him, cutting away sinful and worldly thinking, refreshing and renewing our faith in Christ as we believe and receive His truth. I don’t want to go back to normal either, whatever that is. When we first came face to face with the fact that our hearts had cooled toward Christ and that we had left our first love and heard the calling of Christ to the Ephesians in Rev. 2 to “remember, repent, and repeat”, we began to look in Scripture at what it looks like to love Christ passionately – the forgiven woman, forgiven much who loved much. Then we looked at Mary and her desire for communion with Christ, sitting at His feet and eventually her anointing of Him before the cross – communion and service born of love for Christ. Next we looked at David, a picture of a pursuing, passionate, desperate heart for God. These are all expressions of a heart in love with Christ. But these kinds of responses to God are not forged in a vacuum, are they? As I said last week, love to God, whether it is expressed in vibrant and passionate worship, or faithful service, or the pursuit of communion with God, is the result of and the right response to love from God. Remembering and reflecting on and considering God’s steadfast, faithful, unchanging, unbreakable love for His own, for us, for me personally has been both extremely powerful and heart renewing. We must be freshly reminded of God’s love for His children. We must, and so today I want for us to look at one of the most popular of the parables that Christ taught, what we have come to call the parable of the prodigal son. Now, as we look at this parable, we need to keep something in mind. Parables are not intended to be complete theologies or to give comprehensive doctrinal instruction, but they, instead, are stories that are crafted to communicate one or a few main points. For instance, the fact that the atoning sacrifice of Christ and the shedding of His blood is not mentioned as necessary for forgiveness does not mean that there can be forgiveness apart

from it or that it is unnecessary. It just means that it is not the point of the story. OK? This story is meant to give us a picture of the destructiveness and hopelessness of our sinful condition and of the greatness of God's love and mercy as illustrated by the story of the prodigal and his father. So let's look at it together...(Luke 15:11-32)

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Let me set the context for this parable. Jesus is dealing with the scribes and the Pharisees who, for the life of them, just cannot figure out why it is that Jesus would spend time receiving what they considered to be the worst of sinners and eat with them instead of spending time with the scribes and Pharisees. They had no understanding of His mission to seek and save those that were lost, no comprehension of the mercy and grace of God. Christ Himself and the God of whom Jesus spoke were equally a mystery to them and so it is in response to their confusion and the hardness of their hearts that Jesus tells this incredible parable. He constructs a picture, if you will, of the ultimate sinner – at least from the perspective of the scribes and Pharisees -- and the response of his father to him. Let's break this story down and look at it.

(Luke 15:11–12, ESV) The youngest of two sons comes to his father and makes what would have been a shocking request. He comes to his father and demands that he give to him the share of the property that he would have coming to him when his father dies. It is a callous, coldhearted request. Fathers in the Jewish culture were greatly respected and deeply honored. But this request displays a complete lack of love and esteem for his father. It is tantamount to him saying, "Father, I don't want you and I don't really want any relationship with you, I just want what I have coming to me when you die and I don't want to have to put up with the inconvenience of waiting until you kick the bucket. So how about you just give to me what I have coming to me old man." He is cutting off his relationship with his father and utterly rejecting him. It is an arrogant, prideful, hateful request. That is the picture that Jesus is drawing with His words here. As for the father, he does what his son requests. Though it pains him, though it is a blow to his heart, he gives to his son the desires of his heart. It is a shameful, shameful thing that this son has done.

(Luke 15:13, ESV) He gathered all that he had – now you need to look a little more into this parable, into the meaning of the words to understand what is going on here. The idea behind

this phrase is that he took all that had been given, his inheritance, which would have included cattle, donkeys, male and female servants, buildings or land perhaps, and he sells these things to get money. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that if he is going to liquidate these things in a matter of a few days, he is going to sell them on the cheap. He sells all that his father had worked to build for a steep discount, demonstrating that he has no real understanding of the value of things, nor does he value the works of his father's hands. He treats as of little value his father and all that his father has done and then he went to the far country.

He got as far away from his father and from his father's house as he could. He runs from accountability, runs from responsibility, runs from any expectation of character and uprightness at all. He wants his freedom and his sin. He wants to throw off all moral restraint and the sense is that he gives himself to sinfulness and wickedness, he gives himself to senseless, reckless, thoughtless and worthless living. He is wasteful, unrestrained, and riotous and irresponsible – giving himself to debauchery, to immorality, to sexual impurity. The older brother tells us that he wasted money on prostitutes. He lived in such a way as to satisfy every whim and desire of his flesh and for a short time he found pleasure in this kind of living but he had wasted everything, wasted it all, and made a shipwreck of his life.

(Luke 15:14–16, ESV) After he had run through every thing that he had, now destitute, and alone, a severe famine broke out in the land. Having nothing, he became and indentured servant, a slave, and was forced to go to the fields to feed the pigs. Everything was turned upside down. Once he was on top of the world it seemed, living it up, enjoying the freedom that came with being his own master, but it all came crashing down around him. The money dried up, the supposed friends disappeared, he enslaved – literally “joined himself by begging” to another – another who, by the way, did not even care for him at all. That is evident in the fact that he looked longingly at the carob pods which he fed to the swine but could not even eat those. He was reduced to what can only be described as utter shame – a Jewish boy feeding unclean pigs. Alienated from his father and all alone, he was in inexpressible need, inexpressible want, destitute, hungry, crushed, all brought on by his own rejection of his father, his rejection of his father's house and his father's authority, and the wasting of everything that he had received from him. As I said before, from the perspective of the Pharisees this man would have looked like the ultimate sinner, as bad as it gets. What is possibly left for him but destruction and death that is well-deserved? The Pharisees and scribes would have expected the story to end there with a warning from Jesus about the destructiveness and wickedness of sin, but that is not how Jesus ends the story, is it?

(Luke 15:17, ESV) He had been a fool, but finally he comes to himself – he comes to his senses. He sees what a fool he has been. He sees the shipwreck that he has made of his life. He feels the sharp consequences of his sin and he knows how wretched he has become. He sees his terrible condition. He sees what he has done and sees clearly whom he has offended. As he stares at those carob pods, he is struck by the truth that his father’s servants – men who usually would have made barely enough to get by in that culture – as his father’s servants, they have more than enough bread because his father is a good and generous man while he feels the pangs of hunger as his body is slowly consuming itself. He comes up with a plan.

(Luke 15:18–19, ESV) He rehearses the plan in his mind. To say that he had sinned against heaven is the polite Jewish way of saying “I have sinned against God.” He had sinned against his father’s love and authority as well. He cannot hold to his rights as a son anymore –he has none. He knows his unworthiness to ask anything at all from his father. He can make no claims on his father at all. There are no demands anymore like there was when he demanded that his father give to him his inheritance. No, all that he can hope for is mercy, but he can expect nothing. He is willing to come back home under any circumstances at all – even as a hired servant. Even that would be merciful. He could just as likely be rejected, humiliated, or even put to death, but he is hoping for mercy.

(Luke 15:20, ESV) The prodigal rises to go to his father and what do we see? We see a father who is anxiously awaiting his return. It is no accident that the father saw him when he was still a long way off. He had been hoping for his return, perhaps looking every morning hoping to see his son coming over the horizon. This one day something catches his eye, a man in filthy clothes, covered in grime, weak and emaciated from a lack of food. He is unrecognizable to everyone else. Only a father would have recognized his son and he does.

And gripped with deep love and compassion – he felt it in his gut is the idea behind this word – so gripped was he that he did something that no dignified man in that culture ever would have done. He ran to meet him, to hug him, to kiss him. He ran – middle-aged men in that culture did not run. It was considered shameful and disgraceful for a man to do so. In fact, the idea here is that he sprinted to him, sprinted out of his house, to the outskirts of town, taking the shame upon himself in order to shield his son from the ridicule and mocking and scorning that would have come from the townspeople. He takes the scorn and mockery and shame so his son does not have to bear it. In Deut. 21:18-21 we read these words: (Deuteronomy 21:18–21, ESV) The father runs to his son before any overzealous townspeople could take the law into

their own hands and stone him without his father bringing a charge of rebelliousness against him. If stones were to be thrown, they would strike the father first.

Before even knows it, before he can begin his rehearsed speech of contrition and repentance, this father, filled with love and compassion and grace falls on his neck and hugs him with all of his might and begins to kiss him over and over again – his cheeks, his forehead, his lips, his nose, his eyes, his ears – stinking and dirty and ragged though he was. Here is this son, who is ready to kiss his father's feet, overwhelmed with this outpouring of affection, this outpouring of love and acceptance, of forgiveness and restoration, of reconciliation and delight in having His son back with him again. The father forgave him all, he accepted him fully, he is delighted to have his son back again. Can you picture the scene? Look at verse 21...

(Luke 15:21–22, ESV) The prodigal tries to begin his speech of confession, to ask his father's forgiveness, to give words to his obvious repentance, but his father cuts him off. The words never get out of his mouth. Instead the father is calling out to his servants – quickly, bring the best robe. It is not “clean him up, put some new clothes on him and then put a robe on him.” No, it is quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him. Whose robe would be the best robe? The father's. It would have been a beautiful, embroidered, ornate robe. The best the family had – go get it, put it on him. Put a ring on his hand – This isn't just for decoration, this is a ring that would have identified him as his son. It was a symbol of sonship and authority, a ring that granted the right of access to all that the father had. Put shoes on his feet – slaves went barefoot, but sons wore shoes. Put shoes on him. But the father is not through.

(Luke 15:23, ESV) The fattened calf was kept for the greatest of occasions. The return of his son is an occasion for a party, for a celebration, for joy! Instead of a wasted life, the father is celebrating a life redeemed and restored and he invites everyone to share his joy! You can hear his heart in his words: “For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.” (Luke 15:24, ESV) You can just picture it. Eating and feasting and making merry. The father looking at his son, every so often hugging on him, all of a sudden kissing him, delighting that his son who once as dead is now alive again.

How amazing this is. There is no gradual reception, no slow process by which the son is received by his father – no sleeping out in the barn first, later being allowed to come at first to

eat with the servants and then later allowed to perhaps have a meal or two at the end of his father's table and over time being allowed back into his father's presence. There is no making him to wear some article of clothing that identifies him as the son who ran away, no probationary period, no temporary reception – okay we've buried the hatchet now move on. No way. It is running and embracing and kissing and clothing and celebration. It is the outpouring of great love and affection.

Do you see it beloved? In all of these acts of effusive, lavish, generous, abundant, plentiful acts of love, the father is saying in effect, "You are received by me but not as a servant, YOU ARE MY SON!" What a picture. What amazing mercy. What astonishing grace. What astounding love! No wonder Charles Dickens called it the "greatest short story ever written". It is that, but it is so much more.

Beloved, we know what this story is really about, don't we beloved? This is the story of every one of us in this room who has been saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ. If we have eyes to see and ears to hear, I am the prodigal, you are the prodigal, aren't we? The Father in this story is none other than God. This is how God receives us at salvation. This is how God receives still when we sin and we come to him in true repentance and brokenness. This is the heart of God toward us. This is how God sees us as His children. This story is the story of our lives if we are believers, isn't it?

But the story of the gospel is even greater, isn't it. We were that prodigal. We took his gift of life, we took the good gifts of God, we took the pleasures of God, we and we rejected Him. We rejected His authority, rejected His rule, rejected His will, rejected His authority, spurned His love, rejected Him altogether and lived as if God did not exist, dishonoring Him and wasting our lives, living for our flesh, living for ourselves, rebellious, wicked, filthy and needy, and we didn't even realize it.

God saw us long way off, not just an unwashed face or filthy clothes, or hungry frame, but our souls – the filthiness of our souls. He sees every spot and every blemish and rather than simply waiting for us with open arms for us to come home to Him, He does far more. God in Christ pursues us. The Son of God takes on flesh and comes after us who have been the objects of his love, despite our sin, since before time existed and the earth was spoken into existence. He

pursues us; he comes looking for us to bring us to the Father because we never would have or could have come to Him on our own. He comes pursuing us, dying for us, bearing the shame that we deserve, rising from the dead for us and by His Holy Spirit he opens our blinded eyes to our lost, sinful, rebellious and dead condition we are in, opens our blinded eyes to the love of God in Christ, He gives to us new hearts to behold the “light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” (2 Corinthians 4:4, ESV) He grants us the gift of repentance and faith in Christ unto salvation and the Father receives us with open arms, lavishing us with the kisses of his love, pouring out his grace and favor upon us, clothing us with robe of righteousness, “I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.” (Isaiah 61:10, ESV). He adopts us as sons and daughters “to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.” (Ephesians 1:6, ESV) He makes us His heirs -- “The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ (Romans 8:16–17a, ESV) He puts the shoes of peace upon our feet and has sealed us with “the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.” (Ephesians 1:13–14, ESV) As the Apostle John said: “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. ” (1 John 3:1a, ESV) This is the love of God the Father for us. This is how He loves us. Just as the Father in this parable, in all of these effusive, lavish, generous, abundant, plentiful acts of love toward us, Father God is saying, “You are received by me, YOU ARE MY SON! YOU ARE MY DAUGHTER!” This is amazing love! This is how God saves sinners. This is how God receives repentant sinners, after we are saved and have fallen into sin and come to our senses. This is how God loves – abundantly, profusely, steadfastly – and He loves us like this, Christian, because He loves us in Christ.

Some people get so nervous with this picture of God. Some people get sort of uptight about this. The argument goes something like this: If people know that God receives sinners like this, if they know that God loves them like this, then won't this lead to rampant sin. I mean, if God receives sinners back like this then won't people be encouraged to sin, to have their cake and eat it too?" Paul dealt with something like this in the book of Romans when he was writing about the grace of God and he said: “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?” (Romans 6:1–2, ESV) To believe that beholding and experiencing the bold and abundant and generous and indestructible love of God will somehow contribute to greater sin is to completely misunderstand the might and the power of the love of God in Christ.

It is God's love for us that is the strength and driving force behind faithful living unto the Lord. (2 Corinthians 5:14–15, ESV) When I meditate on the Love of God for me, when I meditate on Christ's love and sacrifice for me, it doesn't cause rebellion and sin to well up within me. I don't think to myself, "Because God loves me, I can sin against Him all the more." That kind of thinking is twisted and reveals a graceless heart and mind that completely misunderstands the wonder of God's love. On the contrary, it is the love of God that is the power and the strength of faithful living. The reason that I worship God is because He loves me and has forgiven me and I love and praise Him in return. The reason that I desire to abide in Christ and commune with God is because out of His love He pursued me as His son, given me access into His presence and the privilege of calling upon my Father. The reason that I want to love and treasure Him is because He has treasured me and brought me to Himself. The reason that I desire to serve God faithfully in ministry and in life is because He has loved and served me by washing me of my sin and clothing me in His righteousness. The reason that I desire to faithfully and sacrificially give Him my tithes and offerings is that He has loved me and given Himself for me and given me all blessings in Him. The reason that I want to be a faithful and loving father and husband is because He has been to me a faithful and loving father and He has entrusted to me a wife and children to love and to lead in pursuing Him. The reason that I desire to live holy before Him and to rightly order my life and to honor Him in all that I do is because He has loved me and He is my Father and I want to please Him. I could go on and on, beloved, but the truth is the same. It is God's love to me and my love to Him that drives faithful loving of God and living for His name. Any other motivation is ill conceived, inadequate, and insufficient to produce faithful, joyful life with God in Christ.

(I talked here extemporaneously about the older brother – no notes, sorry!)

Here is the application for this message – meditate, contemplate, mull over in your mind the love of God for you as His child and seek to live in manner that is pleasing to Him. Consider the love that made Him pursue you, embrace you, open your eyes and bring you to himself. Before you seek to do anything let the love of God for you saturate your soul and respond in love. Worship, obedience, faithful giving, treasuring God, abiding in Christ, rightly ordering your life – it all must come forth from a heart that is captured by the love of God for you...or it will be for naught.

It is God's love that pursues you that brings you to himself and which gives you a place at the table of celebration, at the Lord's Table, where we feast not upon the fatted calf, but upon bread and the fruit of the vine. Bread and drink that preach to us of the way that God in Christ has loved us and pursued us to make us his own – his broken body and shed blood, and bread and drink that are a foreshadowing of the great feast that is yet to come when Christ comes for His church.

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