



# Central Peninsula Church

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Luke 15:1–32

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## The Prodigal Father

SERIES: *A Savior for All People*

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This morning we're looking at what is perhaps the greatest and most widely recognized story ever told. There have been countless books and movies that have taken off on its themes. So many lives have unknowingly followed it like a script. It's hard to teach on this story because any attempt to comment on it can only sell it short; for some reason, the mere reading of it conquers us!

Most people call this the story of the prodigal son. But I really don't think that's a very good name for this story. First of all, the story is not about one son, but about two. One is a prodigal, who wastes his life on extravagant and reckless living; the other is lost in another way. Even more significant is the fact that the focus of the parable is not on the sons, but on the father. Through the actions of the father Jesus is teaching us something about God. You might say that he's teaching us that God himself is a prodigal. This is the parable of the prodigal God. A prodigal is someone who is extravagant and reckless. This story shows us that God is extravagant and reckless in his love for lost people; *a love that refuses to give us what we deserve but can't be prevented from giving us what we desperately need.*

This whole thing came up because Jesus was befriending the wrong kind of people. **"Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them'"** (vv. 1–2). These tax gatherers and sinners lived rebellious lives; they didn't live by God's law. And of course the people who took their religion seriously, the scribes and the Pharisees, were critical of this. They felt that if you hung out with people like that, you were condoning their lifestyle. It was guilt by association. So you need to stay away. You can kind of understand how they felt. I mean, as parents don't we tell our kids to choose their friends wisely? Doesn't God tell us to **"come out from their midst and be separate"** (Is.52:11)? Jesus was aware of this and told three stories in defense of his actions. The first two are about a lost sheep and a lost coin, but we're going to focus on the third. The third is this parable about two lost sons. In many ways, it's very similar to the previous two. It focuses on how God responds to lost people. But, there are some significant differences too. The third story touches us in a deeper place because instead of being about lost merchandise, it's about lost children. It's one thing to lose

a coin; quite another to lose a child.

### I. GOD LOVES THE OUTWARDLY REBELLIOUS

The younger child is described in vv. 11-13.

**"And He said, 'A man had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' So he divided his wealth between them. And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living.'"**

We all know how he felt. He felt limited and confined by having to live under his father's authority. He had a sense of being held down, restrained, and under leash. He was ready to strike out on his own; run his own life; be his own boss. His idea of freedom was like many people's is today—freedom is the opportunity to do anything I want; it's not having to answer to anybody.

So he approached his father and demanded his share of the inheritance. When his father consented, he took the cash and headed off for the furthest place possible. Back then, for the son to ask for his share of the inheritance was considered an great insult. And it was considered foolish for a father to dispose of his wealth while still alive. Even if he did dispose of it, as long as he was alive, the son couldn't sell any of the land that he had inherited. You see, the father would continue to live off the proceeds of the estate so he and his wife would be cared for in their old age. So, not only did this son insult his father by asking for his share of the inheritance, he also refused to care for his father in his old age. He sold his share of the land, took the proceeds, and headed off into the night. In essence, he said, "Listen dad, as far as I'm concerned, you're dead!" This was not just an everyday case of adolescent rebellion. He was turning his back on the relationship.

So off he went. A pocketful of cash and a head full of dreams—a dangerous combination! At first I'm sure he enjoyed himself immensely. He rented a home with a great view and furnished it with taste. He got a new wardrobe. He ate at the best restaurants. He made friends of both sexes. He must have felt, "I've discovered the good life; I've arrived!"

But soon everything began to change.

**"Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began**

**to be impoverished. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him”** (vv. 14–16).

Instead of being free, he began to feel like a slave to his own passions. The need to have more and more resulted in less and less resources. As his cash diminished, his friends disappeared as well. He was no longer able to keep up with the fast crowd. And then the worst happened—a famine hit. He had nowhere to turn. As a foreigner, he was the lowest on the totem pole. He has to take a minimum wage job feeding pigs. That may not seem too bad to us, but to a Jew who had been raised to detest pork, that was the most despicable of all jobs. To make matters worse, he couldn't even support himself with his earnings. He was so hungry that he longed to eat pig food.

So, there he was, at the low point of his life. This is what sin does to us. We break away from life under God's authority. We yearn for freedom. We take God's gifts and use them to pursue our own selfish ends. But in the end, we're the losers! When we decide to leave the household of God to pursue our so-called freedom, we're like a man who climbs to the top of a tall building and jumps off. For the first few stories he feels great. No restraints or restrictions. But what if 10 stories from the ground, he decides to reverse the process. He can't stop the fall. You might say he has 10 stories to review his definition of freedom!

But, for this prodigal, this wasn't the end. There in the pigpen, with an empty belly and an empty wallet, he began to take stock of his life.

**“But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men"'"**” (vv. 17–19).

We're told that “he came to his senses.” That speaks volumes. Literally, he “came to himself” or he “saw himself as he really was.” Pain has a way of doing that. For some, it's the only way we learn! Years ago an old preacher said this about the prodigal: “As his money disappeared he had to sell his clothes in order to eat. He took off his shoes and sold those. Then he took off his coat and sold that. Then he took off his shirt and sold that. And then he came to himself!” This is the first step in repentance—seeing

ourselves for what we are; stopping the denial and admitting how far we've fallen.

And then he began to reason: “My father's hired men have it better than I do.” He decides to return to his father and makes up a little speech to give when he sees him. He'll acknowledge his sin and his unworthiness to be accepted as a son. He'll ask to merely be hired on as a worker. Perhaps he could even pay back what he owed him. He would earn his keep. I mean, shouldn't he? Shouldn't he have to pay his dues? Shouldn't he at least get a stern lecture, or be sent to his room, or get the worst chores; do something to show the seriousness of his actions?

He headed for home, fearing an angry reception, but hoping to appease his father's wrath with his little speech. He never could have guessed what would happen next. **“So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him”** (v. 20). It seems his father had never forgotten his son. He would often scan the horizon for a small figure heading his way. Every movement made his heart leap with hope. But even more surprising is that when the father saw him he ran out to meet him and smothered him with affection. For an Eastern man such as this, wearing a long robe, to run for anything was beneath his dignity. But, in his love and compassion for his son, he was willing to humiliate himself. What amazing love! Could it be that God is willing to bear humiliation in order to reach us? People ask, where is Christ in this story? How can God accept this sinful son without some sacrifice or offering for sin? But perhaps we see Christ in the willingness of the father to bear the shame and humiliation of his son by coming out to meet him. We're reminded of Jesus, who left his father's throne to become a man, and who bore our shame on the cross. God's love is so extravagant that he's willing to humiliate himself to reach us.

But that's not all that happens.

**“And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' And they began to celebrate”** (vv. 21–24).

Immediately the son starts his speech. But he doesn't finish it. He never gets to the part about being a hired worker. Was that because the father interrupted him, or because it just didn't seem necessary? Probably both. God is not looking to meet anyone half way. His love can't be earned. You don't come to God and say, “I'll make it up to you. I'll pay you back.” You just acknowledge your unworthiness and accept his undeserved love, which you so desperately need.

The next thing you know, the father is preparing a welcome home party for his son. All he could do was show up and rejoice. Though the boy had said he was not worthy to be his son, the father lavishes upon him gifts of sonship. He says, "...this *son of mine* was dead and has come to life again..." The best robe was a sign of high position worn only on feast days. The ring was worn as a sign that the son had the same authority that the father had. The sandals were to mark him as a free man; only slaves went barefoot. Best of all, the fattened calf was that animal saved for the most special of occasions. To slaughter the fattened calf meant that the whole village would come to a party in his honor.

What a tremendous story portraying the extravagant love of God for prodigals! No doubt this story warmed the hearts of those sinners and tax-gatherers sitting around the table with him as he told it. Many of us have had the same experience as the prodigal. We've returned to God with our plan to earn back his love, offering to pay our penance, only to find that he's not interested in our offer. No penance, just a party!

But, this isn't everyone's story. There was another group near the table where Jesus sat—the Pharisees. Remember, Jesus began by mentioning two sons, not just one. The rest of the story is about the elder son, who was lost in a different way.

## II. GOD'S LOVE FOR THE INWARDLY RESENTFUL

The scene shifts from the party to the surrounding fields. **"Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound'"** (vv. 25–27). The elder son was coming home after a long day of work. He was the responsible one, always busy serving his father. He was a serious man, so his ears perked up when he heard the sounds of music and dancing. It didn't seem right. He asks a servant what's going on. You get a sense that maybe he knew. Maybe he was always suspicious that the younger son would pull this. Hadn't the father always spoiled him?

I grew up not as an older son but as the younger son. I have just one sibling, a brother who is two-and-a-half years older. And I always knew that I could get away with things that he couldn't. He had to break my parents in. I could act like a little criminal and still find a way to make him take the rap. Older siblings often feel they get the raw end of the deal, as the older brother feels here.

Maybe that's why Jesus says,

**"But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him. But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of**

**yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends; but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him'"** (vv. 28–30).

This was an insult to the father. But notice once again the father's reaction. Just as he did with the younger son, he goes out to meet him. He loves the older son too, and so he goes out and begs him to join the party.

We heard the younger son's speech; here we see that the elder son had prepared one too. Unlike the younger son, he gave the whole thing. He's not angry about his brother's return, or even by his being forgiven, but it's the party that bugs him: "I've been serving you for so long and I've never gotten a party like this! You give him the best veal; I haven't even gotten a goat for my efforts!" I mean, let the repentant come home, but let them come home to pay their dues, not to enjoy a party! What do you learn from that? What about facing the consequences of your actions? What about reaping what you sow? What kind of world would this be if we all made a practice of rewarding sinners with a party while faithful folks out in the fields get nothing?

I mean, what do you have to do to get a little attention around here? Do you ever feel that way? The church spends so much energy on the needy, the sick, the addicted, but what about those of us who keep this place going? What about those of us who work hard and pay our bills and give generously to the church? What about those of us who read our bibles everyday and pray for the missionaries? Why do those of us who quietly do the right things get nothing while those who don't seem to get all the attention? What do you have to do to get a party around here?

We feel we deserve more. As a result, we're resentful and estranged from God. Notice how the elder son speaks of his brother. He says, **"...this son of yours..."** He's excluding himself from the family—this son of yours who is no brother of mine. He's saying, "I don't want to be a part of this family if this is the way it's going to be." This man is just as lost as his brother was. His feet stayed home, but his heart had run away. You can stay home, always do the right thing, live a good, moral, responsible life, and still be lost.

But, the older brother doesn't have the last word. Here is where the Prodigal Father earns his title. **"And he said to him, 'Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found'"** (vv. 31–32). He sees his faithfulness over the years. He doesn't have to earn anything. When we live by the law as this elder son did, we never quite realize the extent of our privileges. And that's because

we don't understand God's love; *a love which refuses to give us what we deserve but can't be prevented from giving us what we need.*

The story ends just like that. The father has extended an invitation to the elder son to join the party. Just as the father loves the younger son in his recklessness so he also loves the older son in his self-righteousness; but he has to make a choice; he has to choose to let go of his self-righteous pride and resentment and join the party. What will he choose to do? What will we choose to do?

You see, this is a love that grants us freedom. In his love, the father granted the younger son freedom to strike out on his own. In his love, the father entreated the older son to join the party, but he wouldn't force him. God gives us freedom to make choices for or against him. Some would say, "What kind of freedom is that? I could do without that kind of freedom." But, have you ever considered the alternative? Could love even exist if we didn't have the freedom to choose against it?

In Rembrandt's painting, which we've been looking at, he shows the father with his hands upon the shoulders of the younger son who kneels in front of him. You can't help but be taken in by those hands. And what is so fascinating is that the two hands are different. One is the strong muscled hand of a man; the other is the sleek and tender hand of a woman. The larger hand is flexed; it holds the son close. But, the smaller hand is relaxed; it communicates release. You see, although God longs to keep us close to him, his love is too great to constrain us by force. He offers freedom to his children; the freedom to reject him; the freedom to leave home; the freedom to NOT join the party. It's a scary freedom, a risky freedom, but it's a freedom that love necessitates.

### III. BECOMING THE FATHER

Where are you in this story? Are you the younger son come home? Early in my Christian experience I most related to him the most. I'd been openly rebellious and selfishly squandered what gifts the father had given me. Somehow I came to my senses and returned to him. I knew that I was unworthy of anything, but upon coming to him I was overwhelmed by his grace and his love. Many of you can relate to that.

But then something strange happens. After we stay home for a while and try hard to be a good son, we often become more like the older son. Many of us can relate more to him. We begin to take grace for granted. That's been my experience. Though I was a

son, I began to act like a hired worker. I tried to earn God's love and ended up being resentful of others who weren't as dedicated as I was, but experienced more of the father's blessings. I've often thought, "If I could only get back to being the younger son. If I could only return to that experience of grace that so bowled me over when I was first a Christian. Maybe I need to go out and sin so I could experience more of that grace."

But, I realize now that that's a myth. We don't have to choose between the loose living of the younger son or the cold self-righteousness of the elder. What God wants is for you and I to grow up and become more like the Father. To begin to act towards others in a way that bears a resemblance to the way he has acted towards us. To become models and givers of his extravagant love for individual people. To welcome with open arms lost people into our lives and into our church family. To refuse to give to others the love they deserve, but insist on giving them the love they need. That's a love that violates our sense of what is right; but that's the love of the Father and that's what he calls us to become.

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