

I want to talk about what's perhaps the greatest and most widely recognized story ever told. There've been countless books and movies that have taken off on its plotline. 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.

It's actually a perfect story for Father's Day. Most people call this the story of the prodigal son. But I really don't think that's what we should call it. First of all, the story isn't about one son, but about two. One is a prodigal, who wastes his life in extravagant and reckless living; the other is lost in another way. Even more significant is that the parable's focus isn't on the sons, but on the father. Through the actions of the father, Jesus is teaching us something about God. You might say he's teaching us God himself is a prodigal. This is the parable of the prodigal Father. A prodigal is someone who's extravagant and reckless. This story shows us our Father-God is extravagant and reckless in his love for lost people, a love that refuses to give us what we deserve but instead gives us what we desperately need.

This whole thing came up because Jesus was befriending the wrong kind of people. "Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, *"This man welcomes sinners and eats with them!"* (Luke 15:1-2). These tax gatherers and sinners lived rebellious lives; they didn't live by God's law. And the people who took their religion seriously, the scribes and the Pharisees, were critical of this. They felt if you hung out with people like that, you were condoning their lifestyle. It's guilt by association. So you need to stay away.

You can 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 to explain and defend his actions. The first two are about a lost sheep and a lost coin, but we're going to focus on the third. This is a 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.

### **God Loves the Outwardly Rebellious**

The younger son described:

**"Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. "Not long after that, the younger son got together**

**all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. vv. 11-13**

We all know how he felt. He felt limited and confined by having to live under his father's authority. He felt like he was being held down, restrained, and on a 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 today — freedom means doing anything I want; it's not having to answer to anybody.

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, the son's request for his share of the inheritance was considered a great insult. The book of Proverbs says it well, *"An inheritance claimed too soon will not be blessed in the end"* (20:21). And it was considered foolish for a father to dispose of his wealth while still alive. Even if he disposed of it, as long as he was alive, the son couldn't sell any of the land he'd inherited. 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.

Not only did this son insult his father by asking for his inheritance, but 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 isn't just an everyday case of adolescent rebellion. He's 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.

**After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. vv.14-16**

Instead of being free, he began to be a slave to his passions. The need to have more and more resulted in fewer and fewer resources. As his cash diminished, his friends disappeared as well. He was no longer able to keep up with the fast crowd.

Then the worst happened — a famine hit. He has nowhere to turn. As a foreigner, he's 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'd been raised to detest pork, that's the most despicable of all jobs. To make matters worse, he couldn't even support himself with his earnings. He was so hungry 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 ten stories from the ground, he decides to reverse the process? He can't stop the fall. You might say he has ten 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.

**"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' So he got up and went to his father. vv.17-20a**

I love that, "he came to his senses." That speaks volumes. Literally, he "came to himself." 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 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 unworthiness to be accepted as a son. He'll ask to just be hired on as a worker. Perhaps he could even pay back what he owed him. He'd earn his keep. He'll pay his dues. Notice how he's dealing with both guilt and shame. To say, "Father, I've sinned against heaven and you" is to deal with his guilt. But then to say, "I'm no longer worthy to be called your son," is to deal with shame. Although he hoped he could live under his father's roof, he couldn't begin to hope he could ever be a true son again.

So he headed for home, fearing an angry reception, but hoping to appease his father's wrath with his little speech. He could never have guessed what would happen next.

**"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. v. 20b**

Listen to those words, "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him." It seems this father

had never forgotten his son. He'd often scanned the horizon for a small figure heading his way. Every movement made his heart leap with hope.

But even more surprising is when the father saw him, he ran out to meet him and smothered him with affection. For a Middle 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's willing to humiliate himself. What amazing love! Could it be our Father God is willing to bear humiliation to reach us? People ask, where's Jesus in this story? How can God accept this sinful son without some sacrifice for sin? But perhaps we see Jesus 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 bore our shame on the cross. God's love is so extravagant he's willing to humiliate himself to reach you.

But that's not all that happens.

**"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate. vv. 21-24**

Immediately, the son starts his speech. He's guilty of sin. He's not worthy to be his son. But that's as far as he gets. He never gets to the part about being a hired worker because the father interrupts him. Not only does he deal with his son's guilt, but he also addresses his shame. The next thing you know, the father is preparing a welcome home party for his son. Though the boy had said he wasn't worthy to be his son, the father lavishes upon him gifts of sonship. He says, "...this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." 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 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; the whole village would come to a party in his honor.

What a tremendous story, portraying the extravagant love of God for prodigals! It's clear that God isn't looking to meet anyone halfway. His love can't be earned. He lavishes gifts of sonship on the most undeserving of people. 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 guilt and shame, and a 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.

### **God's Love for the Inwardly Resentful**

The scene shifts from the party to the surrounding fields.

**“Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ vv. 25-27**

The elder son was coming home after a long day of work. He's the responsible one, always busy serving his father. He's a serious man, so his ears perk up when he hears the sounds of music and dancing. It doesn't seem right. He asks a servant what's going on. You get a sense that maybe he knew. Perhaps he was always suspicious the younger son would pull this. Hadn't the father always spoiled him?

I grew up as the younger son. I have just one sibling, a brother who's two-and-a-half years older. And I always knew I could get away with things 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, “he was angry and was unwilling to go in...”

**“The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill 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 his being forgiven, but it's the party that gets 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?

Do you ever feel that way? For those older son types, we feel we deserve more. But, as a result, we end up 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's no brother of mine. He says, “I don't want to be a part of this family if this is the way it's going to be.”

Make no mistake; 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's where the Prodigal Father earns his title.

**“‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ vv. 31-32**

“Son, you have always been with me...” He sees his faithfulness over the years. “All that is mine is yours...” 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. That's because we don't understand God's love, a love which doesn't give us what we deserve but does give 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 the older son has to make a choice; he has to choose to let go of his pride and resentment and join the party. What will he do? What will we do?

### **Becoming The Father**

Where are you in this story? Are you the younger son come home? Early in my Christian experience, I related to him the most. I'd been openly rebellious and selfishly squandered God's gifts. Somehow, I came to my senses and returned to him. I knew I was unworthy of anything, but I was overwhelmed by his grace and love when I came to him. 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, but they seemed to experience 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 the experience of grace, that bowled me over when I was first a Christian. Maybe I need to go out and sin boldly so I could experience more of that grace.”

But then it dawned on me: I don't have to choose between the loose living of the younger son or the cold self-righteousness of the elder son. What God wants is for me is 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's acted towards me.

I mean, what does true fatherhood look like from the story? This applies to fathers, but also to all of us. I think we'd all agree that, more than anything, this story shows a father's love for his children. Remember, it's love that refuses to give us what we deserve but instead gives us what we desperately need.

I want to get more specific. What does that love mean for us, and what does it look like? I see four things.

## **The Father's Love**

### **Freedom**

First of all, this is a love that gives 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 called *The Return of the Prodigal*, he shows the father with both his hands on the back of the younger son who kneels in front of him. You can't help but be taken in by the father's hands. And what's so fascinating is 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, though 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. It's true of earthly fathers as well. Ultimately, we have to set our children free to choose, and that freedom includes the possibility of turning their back on God or on us.

### **Grief**

The father in this story experienced the grief of two lost sons. Our Father God knows the grief of seeing his children turn their back on him and keep on running. And if you don't think God is capable of grief, read Ephesians 4:30, which says, "*And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.*"

Earthly fathers experience grief as well like when our children make decisions we know will be disastrous; when they even turn their backs on us. The answer isn't to become hardened and calloused. Henri Nouwen says, "This grief is so deep not just because the human sin is so great, but also, and more so because the divine love is so boundless." As fathers, we'll likely experience grief, but here's what we can do with that grief — we can pray. We can turn our painful grief into hopeful prayers. I know there are many parents in pain these days, many fathers who are grieving, but that's part of the reality of loving someone deeply.

### **Forgiveness**

To become like the Father, we have to learn to forgive, and this forgiveness is unconditional. This kind of forgiveness is so hard to do well. How often do we say the words, "I forgive you," but hold onto to our resentment and anger? How often do we really intend to make them pay for their wrongdoings? The father in this story could have accepted his son back as a hired worker. He could have made him pay him back for all the money he squandered. But he didn't. Instead, he chose to forgive. Our Father's forgiveness is unlimited and unconditional.

For us to forgive like him, we have to first internalize how extravagant his forgiveness towards us has been. Only then will we be able to step over all our rationalizations that tell us forgiveness is foolish. Only then will we be able to step over our pride and our hurt. But every time we do, we become more like the Father.

### **Generosity.**

In the parable, the father not only gives his departing son everything he asks for, but he also showers him with gifts and a party when he returns. And then to his elder son, he says, "Everything I have is yours." There's nothing the father keeps for himself. He gives it all to his sons. God has been incredibly generous with us. To become like him is to become generous, even with those who've offended us. It's to throw parties for people who don't deserve it.

You see, that's the Father's love; love that refuses to give us what we deserve but instead gives us what we desperately need. I don't know; I like to imagine that the older son came into the party and joined the celebration. I like to imagine the older son embracing his brother just as his Father did. Wouldn't that be a nice ending to the story?

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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