

Joke: One day a young condor becomes disillusioned with his life and declares to his parents, "I'm leaving and never coming home". He leaves and wanders for a few weeks, but as is the way of things, he realizes he has made a mistake. The young condor returns home and begs forgiveness. His parents are simply happy to see their prodigal son return home and welcome him with open wings.

The young condor realizes that he has not eaten much recently and is starving. "What's for dinner?" he asks.

His father replies, "Carrion, my wayward son."

Week 3

Measuring Your Worth In God's Eyes

John Denver had a tune called, "Gospel Changes." It was released in 1971. Do any of you remember that song? Sorry bad question some of you weren't even around at the time. Maybe you remember his Thank God I'm a Country Boy hit. That was 1974. Oops still to early for some of you folks.

Anyway I'm not sure if Gospel changes was meant to be his attempt at a Christian song but some of the lyrics go like this. . .

The Prodigal Son, he'd been away a while,
he was working his way back home now over many a ragged mile.
When he finally crossed the river and his father saw him near,
there was a joyful sound, for all the world to hear.

I listened to what the Good Book said and it made good sense to me,
talking about reaping what you're sowing, people trying to be free.

Now we've got new names and faces, this time around,
Gospel changes, Lord, still going down.

Truth be told I had no clue what the word prodigal meant.

Do you know what the word prodigal means?

Would you like to know?

If you Google it, that's what everybody does now right? Do you even have a dictionary at home? We do, it's so we can cheat when we play Scrabble. Anyway I digress.

Prodigal means, a person who spends money in a recklessly extravagant way.

And according to the American Heritage Dictionary, prodigal means "recklessly wasteful, extravagant."

So the story of the prodigal son is the story of a son who was recklessly wasteful.

Most of you have heard the story of this son who convinced his father to give him his inheritance early, then he goes and squanders it all on fast, reckless living before coming to himself and returning home.

Only I don't think that's really what the story is about at all. I don't think this is a story about a son. I think the story is actually about the father.

Notice how it begins,

Luke 15:11 (NIV): Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons.

"There was a man who had two sons"

Who's the subject of that sentence? The man?

His sons are the object.

This is the story of the prodigal father. It's about a father who is extravagant and recklessly wasteful with his love for his children.

And to fully appreciate it, you really ought to see it in its entirety. So throughout this message I'm going to be reading several verses out of Luke 15, but if you have your Bible with you or on your phone you might find it helpful to follow along reading from there.

What's really incredible, if you study this story carefully, you'll discover that it can tell you more about God because it's the story of what the Heavenly Father is really like.

We sing that song Good Good Father. Remember how it starts.

Oh, I've heard a thousand stories of what they think You're like
But I've heard the tender whisper of love in the dead of night
And You tell me that You're pleased and that I'm never alone

And that is so true, and if you want to know how God feels about you, if you want to know how much you are worth in God's eyes, or if you've ever wondered if you have any significance in this world, then this story we are looking at this today is for you.

This story answers the question, "How does God feel about you?"

So let me tell you about it, is that alright?

We learned last week that it's the third story in a trilogy of stories he tells in response to some muttering the Pharisees were doing when they saw him hanging out with the riffraff of Israel.

The Pharisees didn't like the fact that he, a fellow rabbi, was dragging down the reputation, at least in their opinion, of all rabbis by associating with these outcasts of society.

All this complaining and whispering didn't sit so well with Jesus.

So he turns to them and tells them about a shepherd who had a hundred sheep and lost one, a woman who had ten coins and lost one, and a father who had two sons and lost one.

That's what we covered last week.

And church, for years I read this story thinking the son was the center of the action. But my view of God shifted when I finally saw that the father, not the son, was the star of the story.

The story of the prodigal father is a story told in five scenes.

Scene one is set on the family farm. It's about the father dividing his property between his two sons.

Scene two covers what happens to the younger son who runs to a faraway land to escape the scorn of the village.

Scene three describes the interaction between the father and the younger son when the younger son returns

Scene four picks up with the older son in the field.

Scene five is about how the older son returns. Or does he?

To understand that, you have to understand some of the rich first century Jewish culture.

This is such an amazing story that I want you to see it in full digital video, with Dolby surround sound in the IMAX theater experience

So for the next 20 or so minutes, I'm going to act as through you know almost nothing about first century Jewish culture and attempt to fill in the whole picture, scene-by-scene.

In scene one, the younger son asks the father to divide his property between his sons so the younger can have his inheritance now.

And he does.

At first glance, you might think that this is just a really cool dad, or maybe he's a dad without too many boundaries who is just like putty in his children's hands.

And you might be right on both counts, but you'd miss the point of what really happens in this scene because what Jesus was actually describing here would be scandalous to every person who heard it.

No one in the Middle East would make such a request of their father. Because to ask for their inheritance early would be like you expressing the death of your father.

Author Ken Bailey, who lived in that region of the world for quite some time wrote this:

For over fifteen years I have been asking people of all walks of life from Morocco to India and from Turkey to the Sudan about the implications of a son's request for his inheritance while the father is still living. The answer has almost always been understandably the same. . .

The conversation goes something like this:

“Has anyone ever made such a request in your village.”

“Never”

“Could anyone ever make such a request?”

“Impossible”

“If anyone did, what would happen?”

“His father would beat him, of course.”

“Why?”

“This request means he wants his father to die.”

One Middle Eastern writer, Ibrahim Sa'id ,writes, “The shepherd in his search for the sheep and the woman in her search for the coin do not do anything out of the ordinary beyond what anyone in their place would do. But the actions the father takes in the third story are unique, marvelous, divine actions which have not been done by any father in the past.”

“Divide your inheritance, so that I can have my share of the estate,” is the request. And to everyone’s amazement, the father does!

The next words of the story go like this,

Luke 15:13 (NIV): 13 “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.

Most of Westerners think he took off so quickly because he was just a party animal, and being in the same town with his conservative old man, well that just cramped his style.

But that's not his motivation for leaving at all. Notice that he didn't leave immediately. He left "not long after that."

Why? Why didn't he just say thanks dad. . .I'm outta here?

It's because he had to liquidate his inheritance. He had to find a buyer for his portion of the family farm, his portion of the family jewels, his portion of the family livestock. And the only people he could sell to were other people in the village.

So as Jesus is telling this story, his listeners were imagining this brash young man, going from door to door, trying to convince people who knew his father to buy a piece of the family property. All those folks knew that this boy had insulted his father, caused him shame, and wished him dead.

And now he was doing the unthinkable, selling off property and possessions that had been in the family for generations.

And I can imagine that at every turn, he was greeted with amazement because they were thinking how could he even have the audacity to do this sort of thing, and greeted with horror and rejection for pretty much the same reason.

After all the family's estate was a significant part of a Middle Easterner's personal identity.

As the scorn mounts, he feels more and more pressure to get out of town.

So he leaves as soon as he has sold the last of his goods. By now, the villagers are openly hostile towards him.

There's been talk about shunning or publicly shaming him; taking some action to put this young, foolish son in his place.

As soon as all the negotiations are done and the transactions completed, the son leaves town and heads for the faraway country, which is where scene two takes place.

In the faraway country, this wayward son gradually descends into his own personal hell.

The text says,

Verse 13 once more. . .

Luke 15:13 (NIV): 13 “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.

“He squandered his wealth in wild living”

He wasted it.

And after the money is gone those in this distant country are no longer impressed by this young man. I can imagine, just my opinion, that they heard the story of how he came into this money in the first place. And they couldn't fathom someone doing that.

Maybe he told them, maybe someone heard the gossip. Maybe they Googled it.

At any rate they too, are unimpressed with this frivolous young man who is now out of money.

The polite way a Middle Easterner gets rid of the unwanted “hold-outs” isn't to come right out and tell them to go home. It's to assign them a task they'll refuse.

So when the son asks for a job, one of the citizens offers to let him become his pig herder. It's a job no self-respecting Jewish boy could accept. Pigs were unclean animals according to the Law of Moses. And they had to be fed seven days a week, which meant he couldn't keep the Sabbath.

To everyone's surprise, he accepts the job. But it's a terrible job, and doesn't pay well enough to even let him fend off the hunger.

In his pit of self-pity, he begins to think honestly about himself. He knows there is no life for him in this foreign land, yet he can't go home to his father because he's a failure. His caused shame to the family name.

Besides he has nothing to offer his father.

Middle Eastern sons are supposed to provide for their fathers in their old age, not live off of them.

Now he begins to think creatively. He realizes that he can't go back home and ask to live in the family house as a son. But maybe he could go home and ask for a job as a hired servant. At least that way maybe just maybe he can be of some use to his father.

So he comes up with a plan:

Luke 15:17–19 (NIV): 17 “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! 18 I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’

Plan is, he'll go home, admit he was a fool, and instead of asking to be reinstated as a son, he'll ask to be hired as a servant!

Not a bad plan after all desperate times calls for desperate measures.

Except for one thing; even if his father accepts him on these terms, which there certainly was no guarantee of that, he'll also have to face the scorn and wrath of the villagers who are well aware of what happened.

After all how did the villagers feel about him when he left? They hated him.

He had disgraced them all by wishing that his father was dead and then again by disposing of the family's property. Adding to this, he lost all his money to despised gentiles nonetheless, and the prodigal has no solution for what he's going to do with the villagers when he gets home.

He will simply have to endure the mocking, scorn, and shame they will give him as he walks through the town on the way to his father's house.

That brings us to scene three, the younger son returns. This is where the father comes into the story in full force.

The father, because of his experience, is fully aware of two things.

First, he knows that the son, given the way and the character he portrayed when he left home, that he was bound to fail. He knows that if the son ever does come home, it will probably not be as a successful businessman, but more likely as a beggar.

The second thing the father knows is that the village will not treat him well. Since his departure, all the townspeople have told him openly and repeatedly that he should not have granted the

inheritance in the first place, that this son is a rascal, and deserves nothing short of death.

He knows that, if the son ever does return, the first person who sees him will quickly pass the word that this outcast has come home and a crowd will gather and likely begin to mock and spit on him, if not hurt him outright.

This father knows that the son, in order to get home, will have to endure the scorn of the crowd with every step he takes through the village.

And so, what he does in scene three to counteract all this is nothing short of amazing.

In scene three, the father does five things that would all be considered outrageous in Middle Eastern society. They're all designed to protect and restore this son that he loves so much; this son who has turned away from him, rejected him, and wished him dead.

The first thing the father does is, he runs.

When word comes to him that his son has been seen on the outskirts of the village, the father runs to him. Can you see why this is so significant? Instead of letting his son run the gauntlet, the father runs the gauntlet for him.

Aren't you glad that Jesus took our shame upon Himself.

It's an outrageous thing he does, because a nobleman with flowing robes never runs anywhere.

But he lifts his robe, exposing his ankles maybe a little more. In are culture some wear they pants to their knees. Anyway this dad runs

down the road, through the village, in front of all the villagers. This father basically humiliates himself to save his son from the villagers jeers.

One ancient Jewish writer Ben Sirach writes this about running. He says. "A man's manner of walking tells you what he is."

A modern scholar Leslie Weatherhead writes this: "It is very undignified in Eastern eyes for an elderly man to run."

And Aristotle, the famous Greek philosopher, said, "Great men never run in public."

But the father does. And Jesus tells us why he says,

Luke 15:20 (NIV): So he got up and went to his father.

"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

Did you catch that. . .

He was filled with compassion for him.

That's how our Heavenly Father feels about his children. He has compassion on us.

The father deliberately runs through the village. He knows he's creating a spectacle. He knows what he's doing will attract a crowd. He knows they will talk about his humiliation in the village for the rest of his life.

Imagine this for just a minute from the son's perspective.

He knows his father lives in the middle of town and that the town hates him. He knows there is no way he can get to the father without enduring scorn. But he has to get to the father in order to become his servant. So he psych's himself up and he walks the last few miles towards the town.

And sure enough, at first sighting on the outskirts of the village, word starts spreading. People are going to gather. He's about to endure the worst moments of his life.

As he comes to the edge of the village, he expects to see rocks, hear the jeers, and see the angry faces.

Instead, what he sees coming towards him are the ankles of his father. To his utter amazement, rather than experiencing the ruthless hostility he deserves for what he's done, he finds a visible demonstration of the love of his father.

Words can't express what this scene conveys, church. You can only imagine it in your mind.

The father runs.

The second thing the father does is, he kisses his son.

The text told us, "He ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him"

Can you picture it?

They're embracing, eye to eye, shoulder to shoulder.

In his mind, the son had pictured himself coming home and lowering himself and asking to be a hired servant.

First, he'd kiss his father's hand, then he'd kiss his father's feet. But the father won't let him. He puts his arms around him and kisses him on both cheeks.

The son can't bend and he can't stoop. All he can do is accept this love.

The Greek word used here to describe what the father does is *kataphilew*. Literally it means, "to kiss again and again."

Picture yourself in this scene for a moment. You have wronged God and you know it. You know you're going to need to grovel, admit wrong, repent, and make all sorts of promises and really mean it.

So you approach him. And you've got your whole speech planned. Only he doesn't even let you begin. The minute you approach him, he embraces you. That's a powerful picture, don't you think?

Now, let's back up for a minute and see what the son had planned to do when he first saw his father. In scene two, he planned out his whole speech. He says,

Luke 15:18–19 (NIV): I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.'

See his plan? Admit his guilt and ask to become a servant in his father's household.

Now, look at the actual speech when it comes out in scene three.

Luke 15:21 (NIV): 21 “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

What’s missing from the speech?

His request to become a servant.

Why is it missing?

I think it’s because he’s overwhelmed by the father’s love.

His plan was to earn his way back into his father’s favor. He never intended to ask his father to accept him back just as he was. How could he do that?

But when the father runs and kisses him, how could he not accept the father’s love for a son?

Hebrews 8:12 (NIV): For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.

The third thing the father does is call for a robe to be put on his son. Imagine this. Here are his exact words:

Luke 15:22 (NIV): 22 “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.

Question: who owned the best robe in the family?

The father.

The father and son are still standing on the edge of the village, and the father wants the whole village to know that he has accepted his son. So he sends his servants to get his own best robe so the son can wear it as he walks home through the village.

That's just amazing.

The fourth thing the father does is also found in verse 22. . .

He says, "Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet"

The ring is most likely a signet ring. It's the ring the father would use to sign all documents, which means the son is a trusted, empowered member of the family. The sandals are a sign that he is a free man, not a servant. Servants didn't get shoes. They walked barefoot.

Finally, the father says,

Luke 15:23 (NIV): Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate.

Not the fatted goat, not a sheep or chicken. The fatted calf. Why a calf?

Because a calf had enough meat on it to feed the whole village.

Do you see what the father is doing?

He's inviting the whole village to share his joy. He doesn't want the son only to be reconciled to him, he wants him to be reconciled to the whole village. He wants everyone to have a relationship with his son.

Wow!

This is a story that no one could have anticipated.

One commentator writes, “For Palestinian listeners, initially the father would naturally be a symbol of God. Then, as the story progresses, the father comes down out of the house and, in a dramatic act, demonstrates unexpected love publicly in humiliation.”

It is a rags-to-unbelievable-riches story. Only the riches aren’t about money, they’re about measuring your worth in God’s eyes.

Do you see what Jesus is doing with this story?

He is communicating to every person who ever wanted to take a step toward God, just how significant we are to him; how God feels about us. He doesn’t just wait for us, he runs to us. He doesn’t let us bear the shame of living our lives as if we wished he were dead. He bears it for us. He kisses us. He puts his robe on us, his ring on our finger, his sandals on our feet, and he kills the fatted calf to celebrate us and invites everyone else to celebrate us with Him.

I wish I had time to unpack all the cool stuff about the way he treats the older brother as well, but I don’t. So I just want to dip into it so you can see what’s there.

Scene four is about the older son. The older son hasn’t left home, but if you read the story carefully, you’ll discover that he, too, has left his father. As the scene opens, where is the older son? He’s out working in the field.

Now, there are two mentions of the older son in the opening of the story. As Jesus begins the story, he says,

Luke 15:11–12 (NIV): Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.

In the first sentence, he’s mentioned as one of the two sons; in the second, he’s mentioned as having received his share of the estate. “He divided his property between them.”

So the older son owns everything that he and his father now live on. It belongs to him.

As the older son is coming in from the fields, he hears music and gets the report from one of the servants that his brother has returned home safely and that a party is going on.

What’s the older brother’s response to this? He becomes angry.

He refuses to join the party. This would be a severe insult to his father, humiliating him a second time in front of the whole village, because the older son’s role at a party was to welcome all the guests. With him not at the party, everybody knows that he has rejected his father.

If you read farther, you find that, in his heart, the older son has distanced himself as much from his father as the younger son.

He says to his father,

Luke 15:29 (NIV): 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.

Those two statements tip us off to the older son’s distance from his father. First of all, does he think of himself as a son? No, he’s been

slaving for the father. He hasn't lived with him like a son, but like a servant. The very thing the younger son had decided was the best he could do after he had shamed his father.

Secondly, he's mad because the father had never given him an animal to throw a party with his friends. Notice that, in his mind, his friends are not the father's friends. He doesn't want to party with his dad or be friends with his friends. He's developed his own relational web and the father has nothing to do with it.

The truly sad and amazing thing about the son, though, is that he felt deprived by the father because the father had never given him anything; no calf, no chicken, not even a goat.

But what happened when the younger son left? The older son got his share of the inheritance too.

So the father says,

Luke 15:31 (NIV): 31 “ ‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.’

In a nutshell, “I already gave it to you! All these years it's been yours.”

2 Peter 1:3 (NIV): His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness

Let me read that once again from The Passion Translation. . .

2 Peter 1:3 (TPT): Everything we could ever need for life and complete devotion to God has already been deposited in us by his divine power. For all this was lavished upon us through the rich experience of knowing him who has called us by name and invited

us to come to him through a glorious manifestation of his goodness.

In our story the older son had distanced himself as well. And he refused to join his father at the party. So what does the father do? The same thing he did for his younger son; he humiliates himself by leaving the party and going out to his older son.

I have seen so many sons and daughters in the Body of Christ that feel so much that they need to work so hard to please the father.

Now hear this church, I'm not suggesting for a minute that there is not work to do. Jesus even said, I must be about my Father's business. I'm not suggesting that you shouldn't live a life that is set apart.

But what I'm suggesting is that you don't work to earn His love, you already have that. You don't work for victory, but rather from victory.

Jesus, our heavenly Savior, humbled himself by hanging on a tree, and He runs to us to bring us home.

He doesn't care what others might say about you, He's not concerned about the bad choices you have made up to this point. He will run to meet you where you're at so that He can say welcome home. And we love because He first loved us.

Jesus had a trial in which He was mocked, ridiculed, shamed, yet was able to look down from a cross and say Father forgive them for they no not what they do.

We sing the song reckless love that says,

There's no shadow You won't light up
Mountain You won't climb up
Coming after me
There's no wall You won't kick down
Lie You won't tear down
Coming after me

And that is the truth. Our God is looking for the prodigals returning home ready to run after them and celebrate even when others may not understand.

The older brother never left the home, but he never understood who he was. He never understood everything his father had was already his.

And church I need to to understand that when you get to the place that you know how much He loves you. How much He longs to be with you. And that He has already provided everything for you. It will transform you. He has given us everything we need.

In the first story, a son is far off, but in the end he is found. In the second story, the son is far off, but in the end what does he do?

That's the question Jesus poses to the Pharisees after telling them about the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son.

Clearly in their minds, they were the older sons. They were the ones who had stayed around, tried to obey, and served God like slaves. But in their hearts they were far off. They didn't want to come to the party and celebrate the return of wayward sons who squandered their living in foreign lands. They didn't want to be near the father.

Jesus is saying, "The younger son understands and accepts that he was far off and has been found. He admits he was lost. The

father comes out to him and outrageously welcomes him back into the home.

Kills the fatted calf, invites the village, puts the family ring back on his hands, and sandals on his feet. Because the gifts and callings of God are without repentance.

The older son is far off, as well. And he's proud, because he knows he's not really all that bad of a guy. He's mad at the father, so he refuses to come in. The father comes out to him in just as much humiliation as he comes out to his younger son. He talks about rejoicing and asks the son to come in.

See, the point of this story is that the father loves all his children so much that he is willing to suffer and be humiliated in order to bring us home.

And God places His Spirit inside us as an inheritance to us. So that He can work in us and ultimately through us so that others can witness Him in us and encounter Jesus through us.

Let me share one more Scripture than we will pray.

Ephesians 1:3–10 (NIV): Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. 4 For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love 5 he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—6 to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. 7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace 8 that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, 9 he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, 10 to be put into effect when the times

reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

Now let me read it once again from The Passion Translation:

Ephesians 1:3–10 (TPT): Every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realm has already been lavished upon us as a love gift from our wonderful heavenly Father, the Father of our Lord Jesus—all because he sees us wrapped into Christ. This is why we celebrate him with all our hearts! 4 And he chose us to be his very own, joining us to himself even before he laid the foundation of the universe! Because of his great love, he ordained us, so that we would be seen as holy in his eyes with an unstained innocence. 5–6 For it was always in his perfect plan to adopt us as his delightful children, through our union with Jesus, the Anointed One, so that his tremendous love that cascades over us would glorify his grace—for the same love he has for his Beloved One, Jesus, he has for us. And this unfolding plan brings him great pleasure! 7 Since we are now joined to Christ, we have been given the treasures of redemption by his blood—the total cancellation of our sins—all because of the cascading riches of his grace. 8 This superabundant grace is already powerfully working in us, releasing within us all forms of wisdom and practical understanding. 9 And through the revelation of the Anointed One, he unveiled his secret desires to us—the hidden mystery of his long-range plan, which he was delighted to implement from the very beginning of time. 10 And because of God’s unfailing purpose, this detailed plan will reign supreme through every period of time until the fulfillment of all the ages finally reaches its climax—when God makes all things new in all of heaven and earth through Jesus Christ.

Prayer

