

A person wearing a long, light-colored, worn robe is walking on a sandy path. The scene is set at sunset, with a warm, golden glow. The person's hands are at their sides, and they are wearing simple sandals. The background is a soft, hazy landscape of sand and rocks.

DR. DENNIS HARRY

PRODIGAL SON



RADICAL GRACE

When Unworthiness Meets
Unconditional Love

Prodigal Son

Radical Grace

When Unworthiness Meets
Unconditional Love



Dr. Dennis Harry

Pastoral Pen Publishing

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All Scriptural quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

**This book is dedicated to my
dad, Dennis Harry Sr.**

**I will be forever thankful for his influence and
direction on my life. He instilled in me a
dedication to God's Word and a willingness to take
up the cross of ministry and serve God faithfully.**

**He came to know Jesus through
the Parable of the Prodigal Son.**

Special Thanks

I want to thank my wife for her patience and understanding. I wear many hats in ministry...and it often places heavy demands on my time. Her support for my various ministries is such an encouragement. Thank you, Lorrie, for supporting me in all my Kingdom endeavors.

About the Author

Pastor Dennis Harry knows the weight of undeserved grace. After twenty years in ministry, he's witnessed countless prodigals return home-some his own congregation members, others complete strangers whose stories echo his own spiritual transformation. Pastoring for twenty years, Dennis has seen grace work miracles in the messiest circumstances-rebellious teenagers, broken marriages, shattered faith.

His writing carries the warmth of a pastor who has grieved with those who grieve and rejoiced with those who rejoice. Dennis understands that grace isn't a theological concept...it is a living reality.

His book *Prodigal Son: Radical Grace* springs from this lived-out experience about God's relentless love for the unworthy. The parable that changed his father's life in 1975 now anchors this powerful book, exploring how divine grace shatters human expectations.

Not only do his words reach an audience of readers, his voice also reaches listeners through two podcasts: *Better Together* and *Bible Truth For Today*. Though he holds advanced degrees from Carolina University and Pensacola Theological Seminary, Dennis writes as a pastor first-someone who's witnessed grace transform ordinary people into extraordinary examples of God's goodness.



To connect with the author and receive updates on upcoming books, visit...

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Chapter 1

It All Began With A Parable

On July 6, 1975, something happened that changed my life forever. You would assume it occurred to me, but actually the circumstances of this day had nothing to do with me...though they had everything to do with me.

My dad, Dennis Harry Sr., was raised in the Church of Christ and remembers clearly being baptized at an early age. My dad has told me the story many times...he walked the aisle under deep conviction, and was told that his baptism, along with good works, would get him into heaven. With that ‘wonderful’ news came years of doubt and fear. Deep down in his heart, he knew nothing had changed – he had no confidence. He attended college, got married, and received a commission into the United States Navy. He proudly served for ten years and had every intention of making the Navy his career. His leadership, personality, and work ethic ensured the promotions continued to come, and life looked promising for this young married sailor.

Traveling overseas, visiting tropical ports...Navy life was a fun life! Though my parents were ‘good moral people’ and had been raised with a connection to church, the exciting Navy atmosphere was full of temptation and alluring sins. Drinking,

smoking, dancing, parties, nightlife: my parents felt right at home in this environment and were having the time of their lives. As a side note, as my dad and I have talked through the years, it always bothered him that the one person tasked with being a spiritual influence (the chaplain) would sit at the bar and drink just like everyone else. Sadly, his presence confirmed over and over again that they were just fine spiritually – if the chaplain was with them in the bar, then they must not be all that bad!

Eventually, two became three, and my parents started growing their family.¹ Lisa's birth didn't bring about much change in my parents; for the most part, my mom and dad kept up their normal social life. In the midst of their growing family, though, there was no avoiding the fact that my parents had nagging doubts about their eternal future. When I was born, however, something in my parents changed.

The responsibility of two children began to weigh heavily on their minds. There was a nagging reality that life was no longer about them, and they had a responsibility to raise their kids in a moral home. Their solution was simple – we need to take our kids to church. Having been raised in a “church setting”, my parents knew that it was the right thing to do. Without really thinking, they decided to visit local churches, and so they naturally looked up the church that was closest to their house.

On July 6th, my parents walked into Grace Baptist Church of Goose Creek, SC. Pastor Gerald Townsend greeted them before the service, and after the usual announcements and songs, he

¹ I am the second of three children; my older sister [Lisa] is three years older than me and my younger sister [Sarah] is six years younger.

stood behind the pulpit and began to preach from the passage in Luke 15. He walked the congregation through the Parable of the Prodigal Son and began to preach on the lost eternal state of sinful man. Even as the sermon began, my dad stood firm on his profession of faith – he knew that he had been baptized and was trying to live a good life.

As the sermon progressed, however, Pastor Townsend came to a pivotal point in the story. Luke 15:15-16 describes in vivid detail a scene that was eye-opening for my father. The prodigal son is at the lowest of lows, helpless and hopeless, with no one to help and no way to save himself. It was at this moment that Pastor Townsend made a very simple point –sinful man is in the pig pen spiritually, and no amount of good works can get him out.

The Holy Spirit's conviction of my father was immediate. It was at that point that he realized that his best efforts were helpless to save – he was still in the depths of his sin and headed to eternity in hell. Right there at his seat, he prayed a simple prayer. “Lord, I quit trying on my own and I trust in you!” At that very moment, something miraculous happened to my dad. He was redeemed by the blood of Jesus, was adopted into the family of God, was restored to fellowship with the Father, and was given all the rights and privileges of a child of God!

My dad’s life was changed forever through the Parable of the Prodigal Son!

Why Do We Love The Parable of the Prodigal Son?

As parables go, this one often tops the list of favorites among Christians! A son who rebels. A father who loves unconditionally.

A brother jealous of the celebration. This parable draws us into a torn relationship between a father and son and then exposes the cultural norms that should have finished off that relationship forever! Instead, we see a son's humble repentance and a father's unconditional love! This parable is full of twists and turns. Is that what makes this passage so popular? What is the "secret sauce" to the Parable of the Prodigal Son? Here are my thoughts.

1. It is relatable.

We love seeing the hurts, heartaches, and joys of our own lives played out before us in full drama. Our humanity fully relates to the themes of this parable. We all have experienced the hurt of a rebellious child, the heartache of painful life consequences, and the rejoicing over restored relationships.

2. It is cultural.

Few parables immerse the reader in such a deep cultural context as the one we are about to study. In fact, the full impact of this story is lost if we neglect to include the culture to which Christ was speaking. These social cues help us fit the puzzle together and make sense of the intricacies that are described within the text.

3. It is understandable.

It was given to be understood. Many of the parables that Jesus used to teach truth also include a brief explanation afterward. He

wants the listeners to walk away with an understanding of the symbolism and meaning. After this parable, Jesus simply turns away and begins talking to the disciples. The parable is understandable as it was given.

4. It is teachable.

The themes and lessons from this story are easy to learn, understand, and pass on to the next generation of believers. Children of all ages can glean from its truth and walk away with a better understanding of God's unfailing love.

5. It is eternal.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is so much more than just a story. I'm going to say something here that will sound really bold. It is meant to be a bold statement. I believe this passage is one of the most important passages in the entire New Testament. No other passage of Scripture measures up in significance as it relates to mankind and salvation. Hear me out. In these verses, our Savior, the master teacher, carefully crafts an intricate story to explain and reveal detailed truths of salvation; no other writer in the New Testament captures a beautiful picture of salvation with such clarity and beauty.

A Moment of Reflection

I hope you understand why I often find myself returning to Luke 15 and this parable. Every time I read it, I am blown away again

by how Jesus so masterfully takes a narrative about a father and son and weaves a powerful image of radical grace into the very fabric of the story. And it's not just the nuts and bolts of story... it's the human emotions like rebellion, desperation, shame, and grace. It becomes a powerful drama lived out in front of our eyes.

More than any other parable, this story moves with incredible rhythm and has a powerful flow as the son descends into his sin. He has a moment of clarity among the pigs, the father's radical grace as he sprints down the dusty road, and then a celebration that would have been scandalous within the culture of their day. While these are great, that's not what I love the most.

It's the overarching theme of the radical grace of our Father, how he willingly clothed himself in flesh and blood and took on the form of man to pay the price of our guilt and shame so that we could return to the Father and be reunited with him. This parable doesn't just describe God's grace, it embodies God's grace. It forces us to feel the seriousness of our rebellious hearts and the incredible grace of the Father who is running toward us even while we are still in our sins.

Luke 15 is a parable that stands above all others, where God's truth and human experience are woven together beautifully into a story that doesn't just change what we understand about the culture, but it changes our very heart.

Heart Check - When God Uses Ordinary Moments

Isn't it awesome how God often uses the most ordinary moments in our lives to accomplish the extraordinary in our hearts? My

dad walked into that little Baptist church on July 6th, 1975, thinking that he was doing what any good, moral parent would do. He was taking his children to church. It was just a normal Sunday morning decision, the kind of decision that millions of parents make without giving it a second thought. However, in that quiet moment and through the familiar words of a passage of scripture that he had probably heard at some point in his life, the Holy Spirit worked in his heart and brought genuine salvation.

My dad didn't have a dramatic experience like Paul on the road to Damascus, or a mountaintop revelation with wind and an earthquake like Elijah. God used a simple story about a wayward son that was given by a faithful pastor, which was heard by my father on an ordinary Sunday morning. I have to wonder if God is preparing some ordinary moments in your life right now. It may be this very book that you're reading, or an interaction that you have with a friend, or the sermon that you will sit under next Sunday morning that is otherwise routine, but God has an eternal purpose. God is always looking to work through the simple things in our life. God used a burning bush, a still small voice, and even simple parables told to normal, average people.

The reason Jesus chose parables wasn't to make truth more complicated, but to make it more accessible. He took these wonderful eternal truths and wrapped them up in the familiar wrappings of everyday life events. His parables used seeds and soil, lost coins, wedding feasts, and sons who were rebellious. These weren't sophisticated or deep. These were simple stories

that were designed to work their way into the heart of any person who was willing to listen.

Please don't despise the ordinary moments in your life. When the Lord is convicting you during a simple scripture reading, listen to what he is trying to speak to your heart. Whether it's the stirring of your heart during the singing of a hymn or a moment of clarity when you're listening to a sermon, this could be the ordinary but simple instrument that God is using to change your heart. My dad's transformation toward the Gospel... My dad's moment of faith came through hearing a simple parable about a prodigal son. Your story of understanding the radical grace of the Father might come through simple, ordinary means. God can miraculously take the simple things of life and use them to confound the mighty. So keep your heart open to his work through the ordinary things of life. That's often where his most extraordinary miracles happen.

Closing Prayer

Jesus, thank you for the quiet and ordinary moments in our life. Thank you for not waiting for us to have everything figured out and perfect before you offer your radical grace to us. Just like you met my dad in a simple church service on a normal Sunday morning, I pray that you would meet with every person that's reading these words right where they are at this moment.

Lord, I pray that we would not despise the simple things in life that draw us closer to you. I pray that you would open our hearts so that when you speak to us in the everyday moments of life, not only will we hear, but we will listen. Lord, for those who

are searching today, or who have doubts about their salvation, like my dad did, I pray that you would use the message of the prodigal son to work its way through their uncertainty and bring a peace that only comes from knowing you as our savior.

Thank you that we don't need dramatic experiences or mountaintop revelations, but Lord, we just need you. Thank you for being the God who speaks to us through the simple things and uses them to change our hearts.

In the name of Jesus, Amen.

Chapter 2

Why Parables?

So, are you ready to dig deeper into the Parable of the Prodigal Son? If you are like me, you like to get right to it! However, I am going to ask you to be patient. There is a method to my madness! In the 20 years as a pastor and after preaching over 3,500 unique sermons, I have learned that understanding context and foundation is absolutely necessary to come to the correct interpretation of a passage.

So, instead of jumping right in, we are going to establish the foundation on which this parable is built; doing so will help us to understand the intricacies and cultural dynamics that could easily be overlooked. Do you really want to know what Jesus was communicating through His words? Is your desire to understand the deep and wonderful meaning of the text? To really understand the Parable of the Prodigal Son to its fullest, we need to ask a few questions and consider the answers.

Question #1

So our first question is “What is a parable? At some point in your life, you have probably heard it described as “an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.” When describing the most influential form of rhetoric that Jesus used on earth, it seems that this definition isn’t quite sufficient to really bear the weight of the moment. However, before we dismiss this definition as too simplistic, we should recognize that it does contain two important truths that help define a parable.

First, a parable is an earthly story. No matter how simplistic or complex, there is an earthly quality to parables that makes them understandable and relatable. Second, a parable has a heavenly meaning. Jesus Christ did not speak in parables to reveal earthly truth; He used that literary device to also reveal spiritual truths.

The ‘earthly’ and ‘heavenly’ parts of a parable are forever linked in God’s Revelation. To understand the ‘heavenly’, you must study and consider how the ‘earthly’ portion is being presented and used within the text. Consequently, if we understand the ‘heavenly’ aspect of a parable, we can then use that spiritual knowledge to help us learn and understand the ‘earthly’ parts that may be a historical mystery within our culture.

The English word parable is actually a transliteration from the Greek. In other words, we borrowed it. In reality, we took the Greek word and simply made it into an English word by adjusting the pronunciation. The Greek root word at hand is *parabalo*, which means “to throw alongside and compare.” *Para*, meaning

“with or along,” and *balo*, meaning “to throw.” Literally, parables are a way to teach truth by throwing an illustration and a story alongside the spiritual truth to make it clearer.

I hope you understand why I am continually drawn to the parables found in the Word of God...why I would choose to research and write on this passage of Scripture. For me, parables are incredibly powerful because the truths are intentionally accessible and relatable. Parables are designed using stories of everyday, simple situations, like a son living at home, or a father waiting for his son to return. These situations help to convey complex theological truths that might otherwise be difficult to understand.

The use of a parable makes it easier for people from every walk of life to understand the powerful truths that Jesus is seeking to communicate. Parables force us to ask tough questions... Where do I see myself in the story? Am I the younger son coming home repentant for my sin, or am I the older son who is struggling to rejoice in his brother's return? You could say that a parable is like a spiritual diagnostic tool... It prompts a deep and personal reflection of where we are in the story.

But parables can be challenging, because they are often filled with nuanced cultural situations. The parable of the prodigal son digs into the messy and often complex reality of how human relationships can disintegrate or be restored. For me, preaching from parables is a powerful tool. It allows me to take real-life situations and struggles and encourage our congregation that their journey of faith, just like we find in the parables, is often filled with both victories and setbacks. Thankfully, the parables

that Jesus used were communicated in a way that transcends both culture and time. It doesn't matter what generation or language you find yourself in. If you dig deep and do your job in understanding the parables and their meanings, they become a source of wisdom and truth for every generation of believers.

That is the power in reading and studying the parables of Jesus Christ. They were given intentionally to teach spiritual truth in a way that is easy to understand! Consider the following principles that Jesus Christ chose to teach through the vehicle of parables:

- There will be many responses to the gospel.
 - Parable of the Sower

- The Kingdom of God starts small but grows quickly.
 - Parable of the Leaven

- There is rejoicing in Heaven over a saved soul.
 - Parable of the Lost Coin

- We are commanded to love our neighbor.
 - Parable of the Good Samaritan

- We are commanded to forgive each other.
 - Parable of the Unforgiving Servant

- God cares about our needs.
 - Parable of the Friend at Night

- God will separate out the true believers from the frauds
 - Parable of the Tares

- We are to influence our communities.
 - Parable of the Lamp and Bushel

- Believers are to use their talents to further the kingdom
 - Parable of the Talents

- Don't compare yourself to others.
 - Parable of the Pharisee and Publican.

...and the list could go on! Matthew contains 23 parables, Mark 8, but the book of Luke has the most recorded with 24...18 of which are unique to that book. It is right in the middle of Luke's gospel that we find the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

Question #2

What was the purpose of New Testament parables? Let's begin to answer this question by restating our previous definition. A parable is an "earthly story with a heavenly meaning." Growing up, I heard this description often. Maybe too often. It became so ingrained in my conscience that whenever someone asks about a parable today, it becomes my first reaction. As it was said before, it is not a bad definition; it does, however, cause some confusion about parables. It creates a misunderstanding of purpose in that it seems to tell us that parables served only one purpose.

Why did Jesus use parables? I have asked teenagers this question as a youth pastor. I have asked junior-age kids as a camp speaker. I have asked adults this question as a senior pastor. The overwhelming answer that I hear is that parables were used to help teach spiritual truth. I don't recall a single time when I have called on a person to answer that question, and the answer was not a variation of that in some shape or form.

Purpose #1 - To Reveal Truth

Well, the first purpose of parables was, indeed, to teach spiritual truth. In fact, Jesus used parables to reveal truths that would be hard to understand or comprehend otherwise.

Consider these parables that Christ used to teach truth to the listeners.

- Parable of the Mustard Seed
 - reveals the small beginnings of a growing kingdom
- Parable of the Sower
 - reveals the different responses that the heart has to the gospel
- Parable of Hidden Treasure
 - reveals the true value of the kingdom
- Parable of Wheat and Tares
 - reveals how God will separate true believers from false converts

- Parable of the Good Samaritan
 - reveals the heart of God regarding love toward our neighbor
- Parable of the Unmerciful Servant
 - reveals what a true heart of forgiveness should look like
- Parable of the Talents
 - reveals the principle of stewardship
- Parable of the Rich Fool
 - reveals what should be considered valuable
- Parable of the Ten Virgins
 - reveals the finality of eternity and man's acceptance or rejection

In fact, for every parable that Jesus gave, He had a very important spiritual lesson that He wanted to reveal. The very nature of the parables used helps us to not only understand a spiritual truth but to comprehend it at a deeper level. We use illustrations in the same way today. Stories are an incredible communication tool that allows our mind to visualize what is being taught, in turn driving the underlying truth deep into our understanding.

Can I encourage you that what we are doing in this book... trying to understand the teachings of Jesus in a deeper and more personal way...is exactly what we find the disciples doing in the Gospels. You are in the same boat as Peter, James, and John.

Think about the interaction between Jesus, the disciples, and the multitudes in Luke 8:1-10. The passage tells us that one day, Jesus went for a walk with His disciples and ministered to the multitudes. No sooner had He begun than a mass of people surrounded Him, longing to hear His words and see His miracles. Understanding the opportunity to speak to the people, He positioned himself to be heard. He waited till the people quieted. He spoke.

“A sower went out to sow his seed: and as he sowed, some fell by the way side; and it was trodden down, and the fowls of the air devoured it. And some fell upon a rock; and as soon as it sprang up, it withered away, because it lacked moisture. And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprang up with it, and choked it. And other fell on good ground, and sprang up, and bare an hundredfold...He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.” Luke 8:5-8

Think about those words...let them really sink in. What do you think Jesus was trying to communicate? The disciples were intrigued. Why did Jesus use so many parables? They (the disciples) were always around Him when He taught, and no one on earth knew more about His teaching style and mannerisms. Curious, the disciples asked the question, “What might this parable be?” The Matthew 13 account of the same event records the question a little differently, “Why speakest thou unto them in parables?” Wow! What a great question! In fact, that is the same question we are asking today. Jesus, why

did you choose to use parables when you spoke to the multitudes? Here is Christ's reply in the Gospel of Luke.

“And he said, Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God: but to others in parables; that seeing they might not see, and hearing they might not understand.”

Purpose #2 - To Conceal Truth

Did you catch it? In this verse, Jesus reveals the second purpose of parables...to hide spiritual truth. Now that may seem foreign to you. In fact, it may even shock you to realize that Jesus spoke in parables to hide the truth of the Gospel from people. It almost seems antithetical to the gospel that Jesus Christ would preach truth, but would do it in a way to hide that truth from the religious leaders who opposed Him! Didn't they need to hear the gospel too? Weren't they in need of heart-changing faith? The answers to both are 'yes.' In fact, we know of at least three members of the religious ruling system who came to saving faith. Do you know who they are?

The first convert is Nicodemus, the ruler who came to Jesus by night in John 3. We see him quietly coming to Jesus after dark, so as not to be seen, and then asking questions concerning spiritual rebirth. After the John 3 conversation, Nicodemus fades from view and is almost forgotten in John's narrative....until Jesus is being taken down from the cross. There we see Nicodemus bringing burial spices and reverently helping take our Lord from off the cross of crucifixion.

Nicodemus wasn't alone that day. He worked quietly alongside Joseph of Arimathaea. Very little is known of this man except for a few verses that reveal his identity in the latter parts of each of the Gospels. Joseph was a rich man, was part of the council that called for Jesus's crucifixion, and is described as a good and righteous man in Luke's gospel. Mark's account gives one more very important piece of information that helps us understand Joseph's motives that day.

“Joseph of Arimathaea, an honourable counsellor, which also waited for the kingdom of God, came, and went in boldly unto Pilate, and craved the body of Jesus.”

Where were the disciples? Where was Peter? Where was Matthew? Where was John? They were nowhere to be found. I find it incredibly ironic that the two men who took Christ's body down, wrapped him gently in new burial clothes, lovingly anointed him with spices for burial, and laid him respectfully in the tomb were two men who had once opposed Christ's ministry.

The third and most well-known example of a Pharisee's conversion is the Apostle Paul. Paul explains the significance of his religious Jewish upbringing in Philippians 3. Raised in a law-abiding Jewish home, Paul (Saul) was proud of his lineage and was a zealous defender of Judaism. His zeal took him into the houses and assemblies of those who followed Christ's teachings; he proudly arrested them and caused a great stir among the Christian community. This all changed, however, when Jesus appeared to him while on the road to Damascus.

This unique salvation experience changed his life; Paul went from the most zealous persecutor of Christians to one of the greatest human influences in the spread of the Gospel.

Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathaea, and Paul....All three were part of the organized religious leadership that Jesus was speaking to that day.

Yes, the second purpose of parables was to conceal the truth, but it wasn't to conceal it from those who were searching. Rather, it was to conceal it from those with a heart already set against the Son of Man. Listen to what Jesus says in Matthew's Gospel.

“For this people’s heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them. “ Matthew 13:15

Jesus came unto his own, and they rejected him outright. They hated him, denied his claims of deity, rejected the evidence of the miraculous...and then they arrested, tried, beat, and crucified him. Their hearts were set on rejection. For these people, Jesus used miracles to hide the truth.

As we finish our general thoughts on parables, consider the general effectiveness of parables in Scripture as a vehicle for truth. Nathan used a parable to confront David about his sin with Bathsheba. It was a parable of a potter and clay that Jeremiah used to illustrate God's authority over Israel. Solomon uses many smaller parables to illustrate the

dangerous consequences of sin in the book of Proverbs. Jesus Himself spoke around 40 parables during His earthly ministry and used them quite effectively!

Remember, a parable is an earthly story that is ‘cast alongside’ a spiritual truth to help us in our understanding. If we neglect either part of the parable (the earthly or spiritual), we are in danger of missing out on the truth that God wants to reveal!

Question #3

Before we begin our venture into Luke 15, we must ask one more very serious question. Is it worth writing a book and investing all the time needed to study one parable? I think for most parables, there are probably better ways to understand and communicate what the Lord was intending to teach through that story. The parable of the mustard seed is one sentence of about 50 words. Could I book be written on that parable? The pearl of great price is also very short... Is it fitting to write a book on the pearl of great price? The parable of the good Samaritan is a very powerful parable that is covered in around six verses, 165 words. We regularly give deep study to the identity of the Levite, the priest, and the Samaritan in that story.

The parable of the prodigal son is different. It is part of a parable set that accounts for 28 consecutive verses, and almost 700 words in the English text...a full chapter!! There is a unified theme with a clear explanation given by Jesus himself. If this

chapter is to be read once and simplified down to one general theme, then Jesus wasted a lot of time telling this story!

With all my heart, I believe this is a worthwhile study for us to pursue. Since we are committing to both writing (my commitment) and reading (your commitment) this book, let me give you my three reasons for investing in this study.

First, it is appropriate to carry out a deep study of this passage because Christ fills an entire chapter with three parables that each have an identical story and focus. The passage we are studying is special. Jesus gives three parables that are parallel versions with identical language, meaning, and interpretation. The significance of this ‘trilogy’ within the parables cannot be overlooked in importance. Jesus clearly intended that these be interpreted together and sought to communicate a very important truth, as is evidenced by the repetition.

Second, the Parable of the Prodigal Son has deep cultural connections within the text that are wasted breath if we choose to ignore them. The first two (of the three) are “set up parables” and establish the overall perspective of our interpretation. “Likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth.” (Luke 15:7) “Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth.” (Luke 15:10) These parables are relatively short but set the stage for the third by telling us where we are headed. The third parable then drives the listener deep into the cultural connections of the day and ties the message of salvation directly into the storyline of rebellion, repentance, and redemption.

Third and most important, this parable offers us one of the most beautiful portraits of God's mercy and grace found in the Scriptures! I vividly remember when I began to truly see the grace and mercy that Jesus communicates through his depiction of the father's love for the son. I had probably read Luke 15 over 100 times... But this time was different. I was beginning to understand with fresh eyes the radical grace that the father offered for his wayward son who was returning home. Why is this picture of grace so powerful? Because it represents God's loving embrace for the lost soul returning to the Father. It demonstrates our heavenly father's pursuit of those who are otherwise unloved and outcasts.

The Beauty of the Embrace

I find myself overwhelmed by the imagery of the father, running and embracing the son... a son who was rebellious and guilty of rejecting the father and wasting all his substance. I am moved by the father's response to his son's humility by lavishly restoring him to his position of Sonship and privilege. The father did not demand a change in life before he restored him as his son. This is the scandalous nature of God's grace toward man... when we come to him in full repentance, he receives us as his son... completely and immediately.

What makes this parable so powerful to me is that it is such a magnificent and beautiful picture of God's mercy and grace, while also clearly depicting the genuine wickedness and sinfulness of the son. Yet in spite of the son's rebellion, the father's Grace was greater.

In my years as a pastor, I have learned that the Gospel doesn't actually make complete sense in our human minds, and from our human perspective. Nothing is ever free. If it seems too good to be true, it probably is. But this is exactly why God's grace is so radical. If it were something we had to earn, it would not be Grace.

I think the most beautiful truth of Luke 15 is that it isn't really about a young man and his father. It's a story about you. It's your story. It's my story. It's the story of every person who has ever lived on this earth, wondering, in the far country of sin and rebellion, having come to yourself, and recognizing that there's only one way back to the Father. You may be the prodigal son, but my God offers radical grace!

Heart Check - How God Makes His Truth Accessible

Let's take a moment at the end of this chapter to appreciate the heart of Jesus as he crafted this parable for us. He could have stood in front of the crowd and offered a deep theological lecture that only someone with a deep education could understand. Jesus could have spoken in riddles that required years and years of logic and philosophy to be able to decode. Instead, Jesus chose simple stories about farmers, lost coins, and wayward sons.

This reveals something very beautiful about the character of Jesus. He wants you to understand him and his truth. Jesus did not make salvation difficult, and he also did not hide it behind the barriers of intellectualism. Instead, he wrapped his eternal truths in the clothing of everyday life because he wants you to

know him. Because he loves you too much to leave you confused about the truth of the Gospel.

This is a real challenge to how we often make faith more complicated than it should be. We would think that deep spirituality requires deep and complex theology. However, Jesus modeled a very different approach. He took profound spiritual truths, such as sin, grace, redemption, and forgiveness, and made them readily accessible to man through simple stories that resonate with the experiences we understand. This doesn't make these truths simple; it reveals that God is willing to take truth to our level so that we can understand it in our finite minds.

Whenever you struggle to understand what the Bible is saying, remember that Jesus spent his entire earthly ministry making the truth clear to mankind. He wants you to understand the truth of the Gospel. I hope this fills your heart with gratitude and confidence whenever you approach God's word. You don't need a seminary degree in order to encounter the Jesus of scripture. You don't have to have a grasp of ancient languages in order to experience God's grace. The same Jesus who walked beside fishermen and tax collectors and called them to follow him is the same one who is speaking to you today through this parable.

Don't be intimidated by the depth of Scripture, but rather be encouraged by how accessible God has made it to us. Every parable that we read, every story that we study, every word is crafted by a God who loves you and wants you to know him in a deep and real way. That's the heart of our savior. He wants you to know him.

Closing Prayer

Jesus, thank you for caring for us enough to make your truth accessible to us. You could have given your Word in ways that were only accessible to biblical scholars. Instead, Lord, you chose the language of everyday life. Thank you for meeting us right where we are in our humanity and for speaking in ways that reach our simple minds.

Lord, protect us from making our faith more complicated than it needs to be. Help us to trust in the simple but wonderful grace that you offer through your son, Jesus Christ. As we study this parable together, Father, I pray that you would open our eyes so that we would see more than just a story. Help us to see the heart of our Savior.

In your precious name we pray, Amen.

Chapter 3

Scriptural Context

Now that we understand why parables were used in Scripture, it is time for us to move a little closer to our study of The Parable of the Prodigal Son. If we jump right into the passage, however, without considering the context in which it was given, we run the very grave risk of either misinterpreting Scripture or misapplying truths from the passage. And so much is at stake.

At the very core of this parable is a beautiful illustration of the good news of salvation and the radical love of the Father; failure to interpret the parable correctly will cast error into the proper understanding. I hope your desire is to understand what Jesus intended to communicate as much as I do! With that in mind, we must spend a few pages understanding the Scriptural context as well as the cultural context in which we find this passage of Scripture.

Our journey into this passage actually begins at the beginning of Luke chapter 15. It is here that we see Jesus walking and ministering among his favorite group of people:

Those who need spiritual renewal! Isn't it interesting that those who had the most knowledge and understanding of the prophecies were the least likely to listen to Christ, while those who were the worst of society and outcasts were drawn to him? We see this all throughout the ministry of Christ, from his first day of teaching right up to his last breath. Jesus loved being around sinners!

Just a few chapters later in Luke's gospel account, we see Jesus making His way through Jericho. Up in a Sycamore tree, waiting for Jesus to pass, was one of the most hated sinners in all the land: a Jewish tax collector. These Jewish men had given their loyalties to the Roman government and used their appointed power over the people to manipulate and steal. They were dirty thieves. No one liked the tax collectors.

When Jesus saw Zacchaeus up in the tree, He immediately motioned for him to come down, then went to Zacchaeus's house and ate. Though we don't know what was said to Zacchaeus that day, we know that afterward he was a changed man! After that meal with Jesus, Zacchaeus took his small personal fortune and began dividing it out among all the people from whom he had stolen; he restored their money fourfold! What was the Pharisee's reaction to this encounter with the Savior?

“And when they saw it, they all murmured, saying, That he was gone to be a guest with a man that is a sinner.” Luke 19:7

Jesus met with Zacchaeus (the man who was the sinner and needed salvation), he is transformed by the gospel message, and the Pharisees complained! This pattern repeats itself all throughout the Gospels—at least 8 times we read that the Pharisees were upset because Jesus was interacting with sinners! They were genuinely bothered that Jesus would offer grace to people so undeserving.

Have you ever found yourself surrounded by Christians complaining about the work that God is doing in the life of a new believer? It is so common that it can become a running narrative among pastors and church leaders... seeing older established Christians in the church become angry and frustrated at the prospect of new believers filling the congregation. It seems like this is an epidemic among those who claim the name of Christ and seek to take ownership of the gospel instead of welcoming sinners to the gospel. When we are distant from the radical extent of our father's love toward us and the vast forgiveness that he offers, we become possessive and think that no one else deserves what we have in Christ.

This is the standard reaction of the Pharisees in the Gospels, and this is the foundation on which our parable is built. Luke 15:1-2 states, "Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them." As Jesus was speaking to the multitudes, a great number of them gathered around to hear His teachings. The Pharisees became angry. In response, Jesus addressed them.

Christ addresses the Pharisees through three parables: The Parable of the Lost Sheep, The Parable of the Lost Coin, and the Parable of the Lost Son. There is incredible parallelism between these three because they were given to the same group of people to communicate the same eternal truth. In fact, one of the greatest guides to help us understand the Parable of the Prodigal Son (The Parable of the Lost Son) is our understanding of the previous two parables in this set.

The Parable of the Lost Sheep is the first in the trilogy of parables. It is very simple yet teaches an exceedingly clear truth through a story of a sheep and a shepherd.

What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it? And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost. I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance. Luke 15:4-7

I would like you to notice a few things about this short parable. First, something was lost. Second, something was found. Third, there was great rejoicing. In just a few concise words, Jesus laid out an easy-to-understand illustration that reveals a pathway to understand all three of the parables. Lost... found...and then rejoicing. Jesus then ends this parable with an explanation that exposes the heavenly meaning of this story.

When sinners come to repentance, there is great joy in heaven! Though Jesus doesn't say it verbally, can you sense the contrast He is presenting between the rejoicing in heaven and the murmuring Pharisees? This contrast will become more evident as we continue. The Parable of the Lost Coin is the second of the three parables. It describes a very similar story and also includes three very important words.

Either what woman having ten pieces of silver, if she lose one piece, doth not light a candle, and sweep the house, and seek diligently till she find it? And when she hath found it, she calleth her friends and her neighbours together, saying, Rejoice with me; for I have found the piece which I had lost. Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth. Luke 15:8-10

I'm sure you caught the three words: lost, found, and rejoicing! This parable is so similar to the first that it plays out almost identically to the first. Something valuable is lost. That item of great value is found. Everyone gathers around and rejoices. And lest we think that there is a lack of clarity over the rejoicing, Jesus again clarifies that there is likewise rejoicing in heaven when one lost soul comes to repentance.

This is so simple yet so foundational to properly understanding the message of the Parable of the Prodigal Son! These three parables were given as a package deal...you can't interpret one independently of the others. Each one is teaching the exact same principle as the others, but from a different earthly perspective. Lost. Found. Rejoicing.

Lost! Something valuable has been lost. It is no longer where it should be, and it has been separated from the one person who holds it most valuable. Notice that the ‘lost’ in these parables very clearly teaches separation. There is a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son. The meaning and interpretation of ‘lost’ cannot change in the third parable, or else you are changing the interpretation that Jesus Christ Himself laid out for us to receive.

Found! Something valuable has been found. It has been brought back to where it should be and is no longer separated from the one person who holds it most valuable. The ‘found’ in these parables clearly teaches a change in position, from separated to united.

Rejoicing! The central character in each parable rejoices over the found item of value. This will also hold true for all three of the parables. The shepherd rejoiced over the found sheep; the woman rejoiced over the found coin; and the Father rejoiced over the found son. You may be wondering why this is important. Let me explain.

Do you remember the title of this book? Prodigal Son, Radical Grace! The radical grace of the father toward the undeserving son is at the center of this parable...the father’s rejoicing over his son that was lost but now is found!

Surrounding Context

Unfortunately, there are some who would try to isolate the Parable of the Prodigal Son from the surrounding Scriptural context. Though the text is clearly about the rejoicing over the lost sinner that repents (salvation) and was given to Pharisees that murmured that Jesus fellowshiped with sinners, some push back on that clear and unmistakable context in the chapter. Instead, they would say that it is about the wayward behavior of a rebellious Christian. They claim that it is about Jesus's unfailing mercy and grace demonstrated to a backslidden believer. While Jesus loves and is gracious to believers who fall from fellowship, is this really what Christ was trying to communicate? God's love to a backslidden believer?

Here are a few questions to consider. Were the Pharisees angry that Jesus was fellowshiping with backslidden believers? Does the lost sheep in Scripture represent a backslidden believer? Does Scripture anywhere indicate that there is "rejoicing in heaven" over a backslidden believer confessing his sin? Why does the word "lost" connote a sinful state in other passages, yet here indicate a backslider?

*For the Son of man is come to seek and to save
that which was lost. Luke 19:10*

Friend, this parable is clearly about salvation and the wonderful mercy and grace that our Heavenly Father offers to all men! Jesus masterfully crafts a story of a rebellious son and casts it alongside our understanding of salvation to give clarity and

perspective. I pray that as you continue reading, God will use His word to bring new understanding and appreciation to the great salvation that He offers to all mankind!

Heart Check

So, as we come to the end of this chapter, I need to ask you a hard question, and I want you to think very carefully before you give an answer. Who are the people that you secretly believe are less deserving of God's grace than you are? Now, be honest with yourself. There are people in our lives that we either knowingly or unknowingly feel are less deserving of God's grace and mercy. Maybe it's a drug addict who keeps relapsing, or the politician who holds views that you believe are morally corrupt. It could be a neighbor or a coworker who has sinned against you, and you cannot seem to forgive them.

The Pharisees had their list; they were the tax collectors and prostitutes, the sinners of their culture. If we're not careful, we can develop our own version of the same spiritual pride that the Pharisees had. We create categories of people in our lives who we think have wandered too far away from the Father to deserve the same grace that God has offered to us. When we do this, we are standing in the same shoes as the Pharisees who were murmuring when Jesus ate with sinners.

A pattern I've often observed in my 20 years of ministry is that sometimes Christians can become the biggest opponents to new believers entering the church family. We forget that Jesus saved us from the depths of sin, and we begin to act as gatekeepers of God's grace rather than the ambassadors that we

are called to be. We get comfortable in our bubble of Christianity and view certain types of sinners as being too messy or too broken for our church environment.

Here's what I've learned: your attitude towards sinners reveals the true depth of your understanding of God's grace toward you. When you grasp how lost you really were and how radical God's grace toward you has been, it becomes much harder to look down on anyone else who needs that same grace. I've heard it said this way: the ground at the foot of the cross is level for everyone. We are all desperate beggars who need Christ's mercy. So let me encourage you, instead of murmuring about the people that Jesus is drawing to himself around you, why not join in the celebration of God's grace toward them? Instead of questioning whether certain people actually deserve the grace of God, remember that none of us deserve God's grace. That's what makes it grace.

Closing Prayer

Dear Lord, we pray that you would forgive us for the times in our lives when we have acted more like the Pharisees than the heavens rejoicing over sinners that have received your grace. We confess that in our pride, we look down on people we consider worse sinners than ourselves, and we forget that we are all desperate and destitute in our sin and need your mercy equally.

Lord, help us to see other people through your eyes. Lord, break down the walls of pride that we have built up around our hearts and show us where we have created categories of people in our lives that we think are less deserving of your grace. Help

us to celebrate when any outcast finds you rather than questioning whether they should be welcomed back into the family of God. Jesus, I am thankful you didn't come for the healthy, but for the sick. Thank you for coming to save sinners. Help us to follow your example of radical grace by reaching out to those people who need you the most, even when it makes us feel uncomfortable.

Help us to show your love to a world that desperately needs to know of the salvation that you offer to all people.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

Chapter 4

Cultural Context

Recently, I was teaching the Resurrection story to a group of kids in our church. I carefully worked my way through the death of Christ and then to His burial in a borrowed tomb. Intending to keep the kids connected, I began asking a series of questions. “Who took Jesus off the cross?” A child responded, “Joseph!” “Where did they put Jesus’s body?” Another piped up, “In the borrowed tomb.” Holding the flashcard with the Roman soldiers guarding the door to the tomb, I asked confidently.... “Do you see the soldiers holding the spear? What was the spear for?” Proudly, a young boy raised his hand and proclaimed, “For picking up hay!”

Believe it or not, that young man was correct! A spear is for picking up hay...at least in our part of the country. Hay fields, cow pastures, chicken houses, and lots of big tractors....that is what you will see if you come visit our community. Around May of each year, the farmers will get what they call “the first cut of hay.” If the weather cooperates throughout the year, they will often get three cuts, which allows them to bale up enough hay to

feed their cows in the winter, and then to sell hay to make a little side profit. Those giant round bales are carried on the front of a tractor with a giant, 6-foot metal spear that lifts them off the ground. When I asked that young boy what the spear was for, his response was directly connected to his cultural background. Culture determines context.

Why is this story relevant to our discussion? It demonstrates that the culture that we grow up in absolutely affects how we read and interpret the Scriptures. We wouldn't expect a person to do otherwise! You only know what you know....and knowing that truth helps us to see the importance of considering the cultural context in which our parable is written.

When Jesus Christ spoke this parable, He wasn't standing in a small rural church in central North Carolina. He wasn't speaking to a large crowd assembled at the 'First Baptist Church' of your nearest major city. This wasn't an appearance at a Christian college chapel, a megachurch gathering, or frankly anything that looks like modern American culture.

Jesus was speaking to a culture that was very different from ours and gave them a parable that is riddled with cultural inferences and connections. If we are to understand how this parable reached into their culture and communicated spiritual truth, we first need to understand a few things about the culture to which Jesus is speaking.

A Foreign Culture

Speaking of culture, a few years ago, my son and I were able to visit some missionary partners in Manila. These missionaries had

grown up in the Philippines, and our church began partnering with them early in their church planting ministry. It was their church's 25th anniversary, and we were excited to be able to go and rejoice with them over what God had accomplished in those 25 years.

I was excited to hear that the Sunday meal would be what we would consider dinner on the grounds... Though there is no ground in Manila. Early Sunday morning, I could smell the 'chicken and rice' that was already cooking in the church kitchen, and as the morning wore on, the smells grew stronger as people began bringing food in to serve at lunch.

However, something odd happened when we finished our morning service and shifted to the meal. The pastor, who is from Manila, quietly asked me and Andrew to follow him to the car. Before we realized what was happening, we were driving off and heading to a special lunch that they had planned for me as the guest speaker. To be honest, I was disappointed. I was really looking forward to sitting with the church people in their small Sunday school classrooms and eating rice on Styrofoam plates with a little bit of seasoned chicken on top. I was excited to see the joy of the Lord on their faces...a joy that transcends culture and language. But that's not how that culture treats honored guests.

To that Pastor and those people, it was completely normal that the honored speaker be taken away to a special meal while everyone else was eating at the church. It is their way of showing special recognition. To me, it seemed unnecessary. That's my culture. But to them, it seemed normal. That was their culture.

Understanding Biblical Culture

For just a moment, let's consider how understanding the Biblical culture in this text is critical to understanding the proper context of the passage.

-When Jesus was asked if it was lawful to pay tribute to Caesar, He was being asked a question that was tied to the political atmosphere of the day.

- Casting out the money changers was tied to the religious customs of the day.

- The Parable of the Sower was given within a Palestinian agricultural context.

-Joseph's "coat of many colors" was the coat of an overseer, which, if that context is ignored, we miss the leadership context of Joseph's teenage years.

-The 'lukewarm' passage in Revelation 3 is tied to Biblical geography.

-The command to "go with them twain" has a military context.

-David's dancing in Psalm 149 has a context of rejoicing and celebration.

-Paul's athletic context helps us understand his words on the Bema Seat...without the context, we would get it wrong.

-The topography of the land surrounding the Sea of Galilee helps us understand the weather patterns that affected the disciples on their journeys.

-The Samaritan woman's appearance alone at the well at midday gives us incredible cultural clues regarding her status among the village and the other women.

You cannot separate the content of a story from the cultural context that is the foundation for the story. Human behavior, patterns of interaction, societal norms, conflict resolution patterns, and even perceived values: these only scratch the surface of the human interactions that are contained within a culture. Imagine taking a Biblical story that is grounded in cultural implications and ethics, firmly uprooting it through translation, transporting it to a modern civilization with completely different cultural norms, and then expecting to fully understand the intricacies of the conversation. That is our task with the Parable of the Prodigal Son....and we need to get it right!

More than geography, politics, and athletics, the issue of cultural and societal norms form the backbone of how to understand and interpret parables. When I travelled to the Philippines, I was confronted with a culture that was very different than mine. I learned to accept it by being willing to understand it.

3 General Categories of Global Cultures

Every culture has a driving force. Broadly, there are three universally recognized driving forces that affect all cultures... some more than others. This generalization produces three basic categories into which global cultures can be divided: guilt cultures, shame cultures, and fear cultures. This is not a new concept, though it may be new to you; it is quite possible that you have never considered the driving forces behind culture. The reality is that you don't know what you don't know! We become so inwardly focused as humans that we fail to see that others may view Scripture from a different cultural perspective. This inward cultural focus often keeps us from a full realization of the power of Biblical narratives and messages.

Guilt Cultures

We will consider this one first because this tends to be the type of culture that most of the readers of this book would be familiar with. Guilt is a strong driving force and tends to drive cultures that are more westernized. In these cultures, there is a strong sense of right versus wrong. Many Western societies are built on the concept that when there are two choices, there is a right way and a wrong way. This ingrained cultural force expresses itself in how we perceive and analyze everything around us! We see it played out in our entertainment (there is usually a good character and a bad character), in our food choices (this food is good for you, this food is bad for you), and in how we view laws and restrictions as well. Those who obey the law are good, and

those who break the law are bad. It is just the way we think and interpret the world around us.

Alongside the understanding of good versus evil is the driving force of guilt versus innocence. Because Westerners paint the world with such a black and white brush, the driving force that is created is guilt. Western society hates guilt. We will do whatever it takes to free ourselves from the guilty conscience that comes from choosing the 'bad' choice in life. Notice how this doesn't keep people from doing wrong, only avoiding the guilt of that wrong decision.

Consider this simple illustration. Hop in the car and come with me as we drive north on I-95 up the East Coast. As we near the interstate, we carefully accelerate down the on-ramp and soon find ourselves ready to merge with the fast-moving traffic. Blinker on. Use the mirrors. We carefully move to the left and are quickly swept away in the steady flow of vehicles. Trying to avoid creating a bottleneck, we move with the flow of traffic.

Now pause the story, and let me ask this question....how fast are we travelling? Without even knowing the speed limit, I would say that we are probably travelling 10-15 miles per hour faster than the posted speed limit. It's likely we are even being passed by cars going much faster! The mass of humanity swiftly cruises right past the speed limit sign with no desire to slow at all....until there is a police cruiser in the left lane.

Now the story changes because no one wants to pass the police car. No one wants to be found guilty by the local law enforcement. We were all guilty beforehand, but we avoided that guilt by convincing ourselves that our speed was necessary. "My

meeting is important.” “I have better things to do than sit in traffic.” “I’m running late.” Now that there is someone to hold us accountable, we all slow down to avoid guilt.

The story changes again. The blue lights come alive, and some poor soul is singled out and pulled to the side. But it wasn’t us! Whew! Just as soon as the police car is out of sight, the traffic pace picks back up, and we are on our way like nothing happened. Life is good again in the fast lane!

Have you ever noticed that when Westerners begin sharing the gospel message with someone who is not a believer, they inevitably jump to the starting point of guilt? I can think of many prominent methods of Western evangelism that all start on the premise that we are guilty before God. Romans 3 is usually the launching point, and man’s sin is the focus. If we can just help them see that they are guilty before God, then they will see their need for a Savior. This ‘guilt-driven’ view of culture also affects how we interpret the Scriptures as well as eventually how we apply the Scriptures. However, the Bible wasn’t written in a Westernized culture! So if you want to fully understand what Jesus was saying as He gave the Parable of the Prodigal Son, you must recognize the cultural differences.

Fear Cultures

We won’t spend much time with this one because it doesn’t affect our conversation as deeply. Fear cultures are predominantly found in tribal and jungle cultures of the world. There is an intense connection with the spirit world and a constant fear of upsetting the balance between the forces of good

and evil. Whenever there is famine or disease, this culture is quick to attempt to bring the spirits back into harmony through sacrifice or spiritual spells. These cultures are driven to appease the spirit forces and live in constant fear that wrong actions will set the spirits in motion to punish them and their village. The cultural measuring stick is fear and power.

Consider how differently a person in this culture would understand and interpret the Scriptures. For just a moment, view the plagues on Egypt through their eyes. Consider how they would understand the parting of the Red Sea, the miracle of tongues at Pentecost, or even the New Testament teaching of the Holy Spirit endwelling. Ministering in a fear-based culture must be done with great care and understanding; their cultural perspective demands it!

Shame Cultures

The third and most important cultural force in our study is the honor/shame force that we will see played out in our passage. Just as guilt/innocence and fear/power are driving forces of culture, the tension between honor and shame is the force that stands behind cultural interpretation in ancient and modern Middle Eastern countries. This is the culture of the Bible. It is one of the keys to understanding this passage!

Let's try to loosely define some terms. When we speak of honor, we are talking about the sense of worth that an individual has within the collective group. To have honor is to have value and to be viewed as meeting the social norms of society. In these cultures, honor is by nature communal; a person's worth is

based on the appearances within the community group. While guilt/innocence cultures tend to be more individualistic, honor/shame cultures are driven by the community. Decisions are made in relation to how they will affect the community. People in these cultures think more about how they will be perceived by the community around them. The community means everything.

Does that mean that honor/shame cultures have no sense of right or wrong? Absolutely not. Honor/shame cultures have a clear sense of morality that is often very clearly defined for those in the community, though the moral code is often unwritten and understood. Choices that bring honor to the community and family are seen as moral. Making moral choices means living in a way that is honorable and honors the traditions of the culture. On the other hand, choices that bring dishonor or shame to the family or community are morally wrong. It is less about a written legal code and more about what brings honor to their relationships.

Along with the community focus, we also see a natural submission to the community's way of dealing with those moral wrongs. It is less important that an individual thinks if something is right; he/she wants to be convinced that the community that they are a part of will approve of their actions.

What happens if they violate the unwritten code of conduct? In a guilt/innocence culture, the community often waits for the law enforcement to pronounce guilt through ticketing, arrest, or prison. However, in an honor/shame culture, it is the group that determines the code of ethics and also enforces that code.

Enforcement in an honor/shame culture, to Western eyes, seems harsh and often lacking compassion. Since honor has been violated, something must be done to restore the honor; usually, this involves one of two options. With the first, honor is restored by publicly putting the offender to shame so that the community knows that it has been resolved. It is not enough for the offender to apologize or offer restitution. Often, the currency that must be paid to restore honor is the currency of shame.

Consider the case of ‘honor killings,’ which is a phenomenon precipitated by the need to restore honor. While it is the most extreme case of cultural action to restore honor, this action often goes unreported, and as a result, it is impossible to know any real statistics. The United Nations estimated in 2010 that there were at least 5,000 such killings taking place every year, though the real number is probably much higher than what was reported. In fact, in a recent article published by *The International Journal of Interdisciplinary and Multidisciplinary Studies*, they estimate that the number of such killings reaches well into the 20,000 range worldwide.² Though this is often seen as an Islamic practice when it occurs in the current worldwide climate, the cultural pressures that drive such behavior are no different than the pressures that existed in the days of Jesus Christ.

It is in the context of such an honor/shame culture that we must read and understand the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Our

² Sneha Singh, “Honour Killings in India: Need For a Composite and Strict Legal Framework,” *International Journal of Interdisciplinary and Multidisciplinary Studies (IJIMS)*, 2017, Vol 4, No.3, 279.

Western eyes see a son who did wrong; their eyes would see a son who had caused shame. We are filled with delight when we read of the Father's forgiveness; they would have been angered at the Father's unwillingness to restore the family honor.

Western culture misses how disrespectful the son's actions were to the family and community. In fact, we will have to work hard as we continue on our journey to understand the full meaning of our passage in light of the cultural context.

While we often interpret the Gospel message through the lens of our personal culture, it is best understood within the culture in which it was given.

Heart Check - What Motivates You?

I want us to pause for a moment and ask you an uncomfortable but necessary question. What really drives your heart to live righteously? We're talking here about motivations. Are you motivated by your love for God and a desire for real heart transformation, or are you concerned about how other people perceive your spiritual walk? I'm not asking this to condemn you.

I want to help you understand the deepest currents that are shaping your journey of faith. In our guilt-based culture, we most often focus on avoiding the shame of being caught in our sin, rather than actually pursuing sincere holiness because we love our Savior. Yes, we attend church, read our Bibles, and do all of the right things, but it's because we fear the guilt of not doing those things.

But Jesus wasn't speaking to people from our culture at that time. He was interacting with people from an honor/shame

culture, where the driving motivation centered around how someone's actions would affect the family and their community. Consider for a moment how the cultural understanding of this parable might just reveal some blind spots in your own spiritual life. Are you driven by a desire to avoid the embarrassment of being known as a person who is unfaithful to the church...or are you motivated by a genuine love for the God who saved you?

There's a huge difference, and it matters. One approach leads to spiritual exhaustion and personal pride. The other approach leads to freedom in Christ and genuine heart transformation.

Let me share with you what I've learned after 20 years of pastoral ministry: examining your motives isn't about achieving perfection in following Christ. It's about the pursuit of Christ. It's about understanding that our righteousness should not be driven by the cultural expectations of fear and judgment, but rather the beauty of the Gospel and of Christ's radical grace that is available to all men.

Closing Prayer

Lord, thank you for opening our eyes and helping us see how much our culture shapes the way that we think and live our Christian faith. We confess that too often our view of righteousness is driven by the fear of the judgment of others rather than our love for you. Lord, help me to honestly examine the motivations of my heart, not to condemn my heart, but so that I can depend more fully on your grace.

Lord, I ask that you would purify my reasons for following you. When we uncover mixed motives in our obedience, remind

us that your love is not based on the purity of our life or intentions, but rather on the perfect sacrifice of your son. Help our hearts to move beyond a culture of Christianity and into a genuine relationship with you.

We ask that you would give us the wisdom to understand your precious Word in the proper context...Please remove any cultural lens from my heart that may distort your truth. Help me be motivated wholly by your perfect and pure grace. Please transform my heart and mind through your Word today.

In Jesus's name, Amen

Chapter 5

Family Shame

Luke 15:11-12 11 And he said, A certain man had two sons: 12 And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living.

Our parable begins with a very simple yet foundational statement. There was a man with two sons. Though the parable will seem to focus primarily on the younger son, Jesus wasn't telling this parable with only the younger son in mind. Over the years, I have heard preachers make a point of this by calling it 'The Parable of the Prodigal Sons' (with their emphasis on the plural sons). I understand the desire to keep the older son in view; he is an important part of the narrative. However, Jesus basically tells us there was an older son who then drops out of the picture until the final scene of the story. In fact, to call both sons 'prodigal' actually changes the meaning of the text... something we don't want to do.

It is, however, very important throughout the narrative to keep the older son in mind. While we won't spend time yet fully

uncovering all we know about him, it is with the ‘older son’ in the background that Jesus is giving this parable in the first place! Remember, it is the context of the Pharisees and their unwillingness to rejoice with Jesus over the redemption of sinners that forms the foundation for this detailed story. To dismiss the older brother as insignificant is to miss one of the most fundamental purposes of this parable: to uncover the heart of pharisaical thinking.

It is also significant that the conversation we are listening in on is taking place between the father and the younger son, who, by cultural norms, is the least worthy of the two to have a serious financial conversation. The position of the elder son was that of honor. It was the elder son who was responsible for keeping the family intact after the father’s death. Elder sons were to receive a double portion of the inheritance. The eldest son assumed a natural position of authority; when this was violated, it created a deep cultural conflict.

Joseph’s Honor/Shame

As we begin this portion of the parable, think about the story of Joseph and his brothers from Genesis chapter 37. Though Joseph was only 17 years old when the story begins, we see Joseph being given the position of overseer by Jacob. We all know that Joseph was given a “coat of many colors.” Interestingly, the Hebrew wording in that passage implies nothing of the color of the garment, though we have been infatuated with the color at the expense of the context of length. Rather, the text implies that he was given a long coat or the coat of an overseer. We also see

Joseph lifted above his brethren through the vivid dreams. In each, Joseph was placed in the position of reverence, and the brothers made obeisance to him.

No wonder the brothers hated Joseph! Even if you think that Joseph was the ‘favorite’ son, their anger would have been stoked into fiery wrath primarily because he was one of the youngest sons and was being honored like one of the oldest sons. This was an outrage, Joseph’s brothers! This would have also been an outrage to the Pharisees to whom Jesus was talking. There were unwritten rules that guided their culture, and it took incredible nerve for the youngest son to even consider himself on the same plane as his father; this type of conversation was completely inappropriate. Their response, only one sentence into the parable, would have been, “Who does this boy think he is? He has no honor!”

Give Me The Goods

Did you see the younger son’s request? “Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me.” Or in other words...give me! In Greek, the command to “give me” includes a few important ‘road signs’ to help us fully understand what was truly being communicated...and since we don’t live in that culture, we need to be aware of what we may be missing.

Let’s start simple; it is a verb. Give, *didōmi* (δίδωμι), is a request for action. The action that the son is communicating is for the father to ‘give’ or ‘grant’ to him something that he has no lawful right to possess. In fact, he has no right to make this request in the first place. Second, the verb is in the present

tense. It wasn't a request for the future or a request for future consideration. Give now. Third, it is in the second person. This clarifies the person that is the subject of the verb: you. He looked at his father and addressed him directly through his words. You give now. Fourth, it is imperative; the imperative tense makes this a clear command.

Again, he isn't asking for his father to consider his request; he is making a demand on his father's goodwill. I demand that you give now. And of course, there is an understood recipient to whom the action will be received as well! I demand that you give it to me now. This is much more than a simple request from a son...this is a demand that is bullish and downright disrespectful!

His Demand

What was his demand? Though we might be tempted to view his demand as a grab for money or a desire for cash, the younger son's demands were as culturally repugnant as they were disrespectful. He demanded his portion of the family inheritance that should be handed out at his father's death; he was basically wishing his father to be dead!

The son's demand demonstrated a brassy disregard for the family inheritance and for his father. In western cultures, an inheritance is a luxury afforded by those who have amassed wealth or investments. The western inheritance is usually dispersed among the family through wills and estates and is primarily linked to the economic accomplishments of the previous generation. This was not the case for the inheritance of

Bible times and for Jewish families. Consider these instructions given regarding the family inheritance:

- Every son received a portion, with the eldest receiving a double portion. (Deuteronomy 21)
- The inheritance was the family connection to the promised land. As a result, land was not to be disposed of permanently but was returned in the ‘Year of Jubilee’. (Leviticus 25)
- The inheritance was divided after the father had passed away. (Numbers 27)

The younger son’s demand was in direct violation of the law of the land regarding the inheritance and would have been viewed as traitorous in that culture. He demonstrated a shameful disregard for the purpose of the inheritance; it was intended to keep the sons connected to the land and prepare them for a life of success as the husbands of new families. His demand was selfish, shortsighted, and shameful.

On a much deeper level, this demand was a blatant show of disrespect for his father as well. The laws regarding inheritance were clear and well-known: the inheritance was only to be distributed after the father had passed away. The son’s demand for the inheritance was a clear cultural statement. What was he saying? “Dad, I wish you were dead!” Imagine the horror of hearing those words as a father today. They are sharp, biting, and communicate a level of hatred and animosity that would be difficult to surpass. The son was acting as if his father were already dead! When the younger son asked for the portion of his

inheritance, he was showing a purposeful neglect of the cultural traditions as well as an offensive and vile disrespect toward his own father. The younger son had brought shame to the family.

The Inheritance of Land

Our final thought on the son's demand centers around a very simple and yet important truth about the Jewish inheritance. Though there might be some money involved, the inheritance was almost always tied directly to and centered around the family land. Land was much more than a commodity or investment; the land that the families lived on had been divided to them through the conquest of Canaan that we read about in the book of Joshua. The land was a direct connection to the promises of God and was worth more to the family than they could ever gain through selling it, but especially by selling any portion.

Because the land was given to the tribes by God, it was commanded that families never lose their connection to ownership. If a family fell on hard times and had to sell their land, they had the right to redeem it at a later date without fear of losing that connection. Included in the Old Testament Law was the provision that automatically returned that land back to the original family every 50 years, the Year of Jubilee. All of these provisions protected the family that owned the land, and rightly so; the land was a gift from God to be protected and preserved from generation to generation! For these reasons, liquidating land was not easy. The buyer would have to make the investment knowing that, in the end, it was not his land to keep, and he

would eventually lose the rights of ownership. No matter how much had been poured into upkeep or upgrades, the land would eventually be deeded back to the original owners.

As a result, land was sold for a fraction of what it was really worth. Selling land to convert into usable currency was an incredibly foolish act that would yield pennies on the dollar. That didn't matter to the younger son, though. Why? Hearts that are set on rebellion and sin are blind to the foolishness of their choices. Sin deceives! When a heart is drawn toward temptation and yields to the brazen rebellion of the younger son, the consequences appear far away. Sin always delivers on the investment - a return of pain and heartache.

The Father's Shame

In honor/shame cultures, the process of bringing about shame and restoring honor is a two-way street. When someone acts in a way that brings shame to the family or community, there is a process of restoring honor to the family. First, there will be a denial of the actions. While Westerners would recognize this as lying to cover up the guilt, generally speaking, Eastern cultures would view lying as a justified and moral act to maintain the family honor. Remember, guilt comes not from doing wrong but from bringing shame on the family or community. If the deed can be denied or covered, then shame has been avoided, and life goes on.

If the shame cannot be denied or covered, it must be avenged. It can be avenged through a payment of money, through an act of reciprocal shame, or through killing. The

shame cannot be disregarded or ignored. That is the unwritten rule of honor/shame cultures, and it is so ingrained in their conscience that further shame is brought on a family that refuses to deal with its problems. Refusing to bring your rebellious son back under your authority is shameful in itself!

In this culture, how should a father respond to a son who is demanding his inheritance before the father is dead? It's simple. A son of that nature would, at the very least, be disowned (dead to the family) and pushed out of the community; it is also quite possible that that son would be stoned to death to restore the family honor. Now, before you decide that these two options are more extreme than the Biblical narrative would make provision for, consider the story of Stephen from Acts 7.

Stephen and Honor/Shame

Stephen is introduced in Acts 6 and is described as a man “full of faith and the Holy Ghost...full of faith and power.” He assisted the 12 disciples faithfully in the church through serving others and meeting spiritual needs. As the chapter progresses, Stephen's faith is transformed into powerful miracles and passionate preaching! It did not take long before his conspicuous ministry garnered the attention of the religious rulers of the synagogue. They arrested Stephen and brought him before the council; many of these men would have stood in judgment of Jesus Christ just a few years before. Their request? Stephen, tell us what you have been preaching.

This was a unique ministry opportunity for this young man. God was using him greatly in the community, and now he was

being given an open floor with those who needed to hear the gospel the most...the unbelieving Jewish leaders! Knowing the rare opportunity he was being given, Stephen approached these men by appealing to the one thing that meant the most to them... their culture!

“The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran, and said unto him, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and come into the land which I shall shew thee. Then came he out of the land of the Chaldaeans, and dwelt in Charran: and "from thence, when his father was dead, he removed him into this land, wherein ye now dwell.”

Stephen knew exactly what he was doing; he was drawing them in through the lure of their cultural connection. There was an immediate connection to their ancestral roots and Jewish heritage. He then progressed through a detailed history of the Jewish people: Joseph and his brothers, the Egyptian enslavement, the Great Exodus, Mount Sinai, the wilderness wanderings, and the special role that Moses played as a prophet to the people. He stops there in the narrative and makes a very clear point that, though God spoke through Moses to the people, there was a group of Israelites who refused to submit to Moses and his words. They were resistant and hard-hearted; they were a rebellious people.

At this point, it is unclear what the members of the council would have been thinking. We see no response or interaction with them in the text...Stephen really hasn't said anything that

they don't already know through their careful study of history and culture. And then Stephen took a deep breath and paused. He knew that the words he was about to speak would have consequences. The next few words that were migrating from his mind to his tongue were true words. There would be no disputing the accuracy of what he was getting ready to say.

However, to the Pharisees these words created a sense of deep shame. They were ashamed...very shameful.

“Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye. Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? And they have slain them which shewed before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers: Who have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it.”

Stephen held nothing back. He knew that his words would have consequences, but what was said needed to be said. “Men of the council, in the same way that our Jewish forefathers rejected the prophet of God by rejecting Moses, you have rejected the very Son of God and have killed the innocent Messiah! Though you may follow the outward circumcision, your heart is hard and is uncircumcised before Jehovah!” Stephen preached a message of shame. It triggered a cultural reaction in the hearts of the council. There was no hiding what Stephen had said...he had spoken in an open meeting with possibly hundreds looking on. There was only one option to bring honor back to the council. Stephen must be killed.

“When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth....Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord, and cast him out of the city, and stoned him.”

The shame that was triggered by Stephen’s words to the council was restored to honor as the men walked away from his lifeless body. In honor/shame cultures, shameful actions demand the restoration of honor. With that in mind, consider the actions of the father in our parable. Our first introduction to him comes in the form of these words:

“And he divided unto them his living.”

The culture would demand that the father restore honor to the family through public shaming or disowning of the son. The family’s name had been tarnished, and this demanded an open and harsh response to the son! Surprisingly, this did not happen. In fact, the first introduction to the father in this parable is his incredible act of grace and mercy. It is hard to communicate how unthinkable the father’s reaction would have been to the Pharisees and the others listening. It cuts directly against the grain of the honor/shame dynamic in their culture.

There are three powerful truths that we see through the father’s response to the rebellious son. First, the father’s initial response was a response of radical grace. The essence of grace is this simple truth...unmerited favor. Grace is receiving something that is undeserved and unearned. The younger son had done nothing to receive the inheritance of the father! Though the

inheritance was a normal family function in society, the son relinquished all 'right' to his inheritance the moment that he demanded it! It was only through indescribable grace that the father decided to divide his land and give the younger son his portion.

Secondly, the father demonstrates a mercy that goes against all cultural expectations. At the very least, the son deserved to be shunned and expelled from the village. Quite often, actions like this resulted in severe beating or even death. The son had placed himself at the cultural mercy of the father, and the father extended wondrous mercy through his refusal to bring down such a harsh punishment. Mercy like that, however, is not without a price.

The third aspect of the father that is revealed in this simple introduction is his willingness to bear the shame of his rebellious son on himself. The honor/shame culture demands that shameful actions be confronted and that honor be restored. In short, it was just as shameful for the father to extend grace and mercy to the rebellious son as it was for the son to rebel in the first place! A father who refused to deal with a rebellious son was, in essence, bearing the shame on himself.

No doubt the Pharisees were bothered as they sat listening to Jesus speak. The son deserved to be punished, yet the father was extending grace and mercy. It was a confusing introduction to the story because it cut across many of the cultural norms of the day. This, however, was only the beginning!

Who is the father?

There is one final thing we need to establish before we move onward...the identity of the father. Who does he represent? We know the wayward son represents a sinner who, within the story, comes to repentance (that is the context of Luke 15), but we aren't told directly the identity of the father in the story.

The instinctive interpretation (because of the word 'father') is to assume that 'the father' represents God the Father. I don't think that there is much danger in making that assumption. However, when we dig deeper to understand the real meaning of the parable, the identity of the father becomes more important theologically, and we don't want to just assume.

The father's identity becomes evident through two textual hints: the Scriptural context within the passage, as well as the actions of the father when he is introduced in the parable. First, the purpose of the parable is to reveal the heart condition of the Pharisees in response to Christ's actions. Think back to the contextual introduction that we uncovered in a previous chapter. The issue at hand was simple...the Pharisees were angered that Jesus was eating and fellowshiping with sinners. Jesus is at the center of the controversy, so it would make sense that Jesus is at the center of the parable to reveal the reality of their own rebellion.

Secondly, within the context of the passage, it was the fact that Jesus was extending grace and mercy to sinners that unwrapped their inner rebellion. In the parable, the father's first actions are to extend grace and mercy to the undeserving son. Notice how the father and Jesus are one and the same.

The greatest evidence, however, that the father is best represented by Jesus Christ is this fact: it was Jesus Christ who bore the shame and guilt of my rebellion through his offer of grace and mercy! In the same way that the father in the parable chose to take the shame of the son on himself, it was Jesus who bore the cross of my shame! It is through Jesus's name that unmerited favor and reconciliation are offered to all mankind! It was Jesus Christ's radical grace that we are offered restoration back to the family of God as wayward sinners. What a gracious and merciful Savior!!

But before we can fully appreciate the wondrous nature of the Father's mercy, we need to fully understand the depths of our sin. It is with this in mind that Jesus moves into the next portion of His parable...the shameful living of the younger son.

Heart Check - Wounding The Father's Heart

I want you to let this question sit with you for a moment before you give an answer. Have there been times in your life when you looked at God and demanded that he give you what you wanted? Maybe you weren't being as bold as the prodigal son was as he demanded his inheritance, but your heart attitude was the same. Maybe you've approached God with a sense of personal entitlement, acting as if God were some sort of vending machine to give you the things that you love and enjoy. Or maybe you've lived as if he were already dead to you, in the same way that the younger son demanded his portion of goods with no regard for his father's life and relationship with him.

How often do we approach our relationship with God in the same way? We want his blessings and provision, but we push his love, grace, and authority away from our lives. We want the inheritance without the relationship.

There's something that strikes me as incredibly powerful about this passage. The father's response reveals both the depth of our own sin and the radical nature of God's grace toward us. While the son's demand could have resulted in him being immediately disowned and shamed in their culture, the father instead chose to bear that shame himself. This is exactly what Jesus Christ did for us on the cross. He took our shame upon himself. If you see yourself in the younger son's selfish demands, don't despair. The beauty and power of this incredible parable is that it does not end with the son's rebellion. That's not the end of the story. The father's grace is so radical because it is so undeserved. When we live in a way that is undeserving of his grace, it simply reminds us how much he loves us and how radical his grace is that is bestowed toward us.

Closing Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, we come to you today with hearts that are heavy with the weight of our own rebellion. So many times we have approached you like the younger son, demanding your blessings and your gifts, while rejecting your Lordship and your guidance. We have lived as though you were dead to us, pursuing our own paths and hearing our own voice in our hearts.

Lord, forgive us for the times we have wounded your heart with our own selfishness. We recognize that we deserve to be

shamed and disowned as a consequence of our wickedness. Yet we are amazed by your radical grace. We are overwhelmed that you willingly give us what we do not deserve by bearing our shame on yourself. Thank you, Jesus, for absorbing the dishonor we brought to your name.

Please create within us tender hearts that will seek you above our own desires and pursue a deeper relationship with you more than we pursue the things that we would get from you.

In Christ's name we pray, Amen.

Chapter 6

Riotous Living

13 And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living. 14 And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want.

It didn't take long for the son in our story to put his plans into action. He was fed up with all the trappings of Jewish culture and Jewish life. He took full advantage of his father's gracious actions, and within a few short days, he was gone. He fled to a far country and lived a life of excess and waste off the goodness of his father. If the Pharisees hated the younger son already, this would have driven them mad! Before the rebellious son could make his escape, though, he faced an obstacle that is not clear within the text but would have been very clear to the listeners.

While the father did graciously give the son his portion of the inheritance, it was most likely not in cash or currency but in the form of land. Remember, the land was the promise given to Abraham, and it was the land that was divided among the

Israelite tribes as they entered and conquered Canaan. This presented a real problem for the young man. While land does have value, selling the land inheritance created three huge hurdles he had to overcome.

The Land Inheritance

First, land is not spendable currency! While land is valuable and, under normal circumstances, would probably have fetched a nice price, the young man was able to resolve this issue in a matter of days. He had to sell the land (liquidate the assets) in order to have money to take with him on his adventure! So the first hurdle is the fact that he must sell the land to get the money. The second hurdle would have been very obvious to the listeners that day. Selling family land was almost unheard of because it was not permanent. While there were a few exceptions, every 50 years land that had been sold was to be put back into the name of the family that had originally received it during the conquest of Canaan. In other words, a person who bought land knew that it really wasn't his land but would be given back after a period of time. It was more of a lease.

The third hurdle was probably the biggest of the three.

Under the circumstances of the son's rebellion, no respectable Jewish person would ever think of even purchasing the land!

I hope you see...the younger son was acting in shame, and it would only bring further shame to others if they involved themselves in his scandalous behavior by purchasing the inherited land. The fact that he was willing to part with Jehovah's promised land to his family was unthinkable! Scandalous!

Maybe you remember the story from 1 Kings where Ahab went on a walk and saw Naboth's vineyard. Ahab, the King of Israel, approached Naboth and asked if he could have the land. Naboth's response demonstrates the intense relationship that the Jewish people had with their land inheritance.

1 Kings 21: 3 And Naboth said to Ahab, The LORD forbid it me, that I should give the inheritance of my fathers unto thee.

Naboth refused to give his land to the king and ultimately lost his life protecting the inheritance that had been passed down from his fathers. The inherited land was sacred! No respectable Jew would ever agree to purchase land that was tainted by the son's shame.

These three issues would make the selling of the land very difficult. However, we see he sold it very quickly. Within a few days, he was off on his escapade with cash in hand....probably having sold the land for far less than what it was really worth in order to liquidate it so quickly. A modern version of this story would have the younger son taking the title to his father's vehicle to a "Title Loan" lender and receiving pennies on the dollar for the actual value of the vehicle. It is possible to liquidate land quickly, but you have to settle for a fraction of what it is actually worth.

There are two incredible life lessons that are demonstrated in the son's behavior. First, people who are consumed with sin will do foolish and illogical things to satisfy their own lusts. There is no thought for how their actions will cost them dearly in the long

run or how they are settling for a future that will be filled with disappointment and heartache. The younger son was literally trading his future away for a fool's pittance. Second, a person who is the attendant to sin holds nothing back; they are all in. The son gathered 'all' of his belongings as he prepared for his journey. He had no plans to return to his father. He was headed to a far country.

...and took his journey into a far country...

Jesus was speaking in a Jewish context to a Jewish audience. There was no doubt in their minds that the 'far country' was referring to a Gentile land where the young man could leave his cultural and religious heritage behind. He had turned his back on his father, and now he was turning his back on his own people. This was repulsive to the Jewish listeners. The very community that had raised and supported him through his early years was now the object of his scorn.

It is very obvious that the boy had put very little thought into his journey. He had no idea what he was getting into or what to expect when he got there. He had set his eyes on pleasure, and nothing short of that goal would satisfy. Often, when we see a person making the move toward sin, we assume that it will be a slow movement away from the Father. The younger son demonstrates to us that when sinful man sets his heart toward sin, it isn't always a slow progression. Our sinful flesh can take us into a far country very quickly, separate from the Father and far away from the benefits of sonship.

...and there wasted his substance with riotous living.

Have you ever wondered why this parable is called The Parable of the Prodigal Son? My guess is that you probably think that prodigal means wayward or rebellious. That's what I thought for about 40 years of my life! It had been repeated and repeated so many times that I assumed I knew exactly what it meant. How often have you heard a despondent parent speak of their own 'prodigal' child? I have heard it so often these days that I know people don't know what prodigal means! Now don't look it up quite yet...it will make more sense as we uncover the truths within this part of the parable.

So we read that the younger son wasted away all of his possessions. The word wasted is perfectly acceptable as a translation, but it is only acceptable if we really understand the foundation that it is built on. It comes from a Greek word (διασκορπίζω diaskorpizo) which means "to winnow away" or "to squander." Winnowing is the process of taking harvested grains and separating the usable part from the chaff. In Bible days, this was done by taking the pile of harvested grain and throwing it up into the air; the chaff would blow away, and the usable grain would fall back to the floor. As you repeated this over and over, eventually there was no chaff left in the pile. It had all been winnowed away.

Imagine a young man who is experiencing life to the fullest for the first time. He is free from the shackles of parents and the cares of a watching community. He is free to spend his money however he wants, on whatever he wants, whenever he wants! It is as if he is taking piles of cash and throwing them into the air,

and the wind gently carries it away, never to be seen. In a literal sense, that money has been winnowed away through wasteful spending. This is the picture that Jesus wants us to see as he describes the actions of the rebellious son. Yet it isn't his rebellion that earns him the title 'The Prodigal Son.' It is his wasteful and extravagant spending!

Prodigal doesn't mean rebellious or defiant at all; it means overflowing in abundance, unsparing, and liberal. It is the son's extravagant and lavish lifestyle that earns him the title of "The Prodigal."

In a sense, there are really two people in this story who qualify as 'prodigal' in their behavior. Though we would shudder to call the father prodigal, we will see that he lives up to that name as well! We have chosen to call the father's grace 'radical grace', but you could really describe it as 'prodigal grace.' Lavish and abundant. I would ask that you tuck that thought away for a few pages. We will cover the father's lavish grace very soon!

The Wasteful Son

Sinful people driven by sinful desires make sinful choices. It happens all around us today. The young son in our story was no different. In our text, he squanders his money away on 'riotous living' and excess. He sells the family land for pennies on the dollar and then goes and wastes it all! It is as if he has no consciousness of his father's sacrifice and the value that the land had to his future. The passage doesn't go into much more detail regarding the sinful lifestyle.

There is, however, an interesting comment made by the older brother later in the story. In verse 30, during the interaction between the father and the older son, he makes a statement about his brother's actions. "But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots..." The older brother makes a claim of sexual impropriety, along with other issues that are obvious in the story. The bottom line is this: can we trust the older brother? Is he stating something that is true, or is he attempting to denigrate his brother even more in order to make himself look better?

While it is completely possible, and maybe even likely, that the younger brother was involved in immoral behavior with prostitutes, that was not Jesus's point. In fact, whether or not he paid for sexual relations is such an incredibly small part of the story and insignificant to the shame culture that was judging him. Rather, Jesus is revealing the heart attitude of the Pharisees, who were more concerned about the sins of others than the sins of their own hearts. Their selfish heart was revealed through the older brother, who was more concerned about pointing out the sins of his younger sibling than rejoicing that he had returned home.

*14 And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine
in that land; and he began to be in want.*

Welcome to your daily dose of reality. If you live fast and loose, it will catch up with you sooner or later! I have heard this said many times in my life, and so it is not original to me. "You

can choose your sins, but you can't choose your consequences." This has never been as true as it was in the younger son's life. He winnowed away his money in riotous and sinful living. He made friends, bought influence, and wasted all of the inheritance on the temporary cares of this world.

Unavoidable Consequences

As we consider the depths of the son's despair, I want us to see first that this was a predictable outcome for the younger son. When you choose to live life seeking after the flesh, the inevitable outcome is pain and suffering. Galatians 6:7-8 describes it this way. "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting." Paul begins this simple truth with these words - "Be not deceived." Don't be deceived! God will not be made a mockery. No one has ever beaten the system, and no one ever will. When you sow to the flesh, you will reap destruction. It is that simple and is plainly unavoidable! You cannot sow to the desires of the flesh and then expect to reap the harvest of righteous living. It doesn't happen. It has never happened. It will never happen.

When Adam was given a simple command of "Do not eat" in the garden, the choice to obey was as simple as it gets. Obey and be blessed; disobey and die. There was no getting around the consequence of the sin - spiritual death. Adam did not die physically that day, and even after he had sinned, he still had the ability to talk to God and understand the reality of his sin.

Adam's death and the prodigal's death are one and the same. They are both removed from fellowship with the father and are distant, with no right to being restored. Sadly, we see the predictability of sin played out in the lives of people all around us, do we not? People will live to satisfy the longings of the flesh and sin, and then are surprised when the consequences are painful and difficult.

Hear this and hear it well. Life is always better when we live it God's way. Obedience always brings blessing, and disobedience always brings hurt. The prodigal son learned this through his experiences; the outcome of his rebellion was predictable destruction.

Empty Promises

Secondly, whatever the son thought he would find in his travels, he did not find! No one travels to the far country looking for heartache. People don't seek out sin for its consequences but for its pleasures. As is recorded in Hebrews 11, there is "pleasure of sin for a season," and it is this pleasure that the sinful flesh is longing after. The pleasure is fleeting, though. Soon, the season of fun is over, and the reality of consequences hits home....and the consequences of sin are harsh and devastating. Verse 14 ends with this phrase, "and he began to be in want." The prodigal was looking for pleasure, but instead he found pain. He sought after the things that would satisfy the flesh. I'm sure he was satisfied for a short while, but as with all sin, there are consequences that will eventually catch up with you.

It is interesting that our Lord uses the occurrence of famine in this parable. Remember, He is not giving a historical narrative but is crafting a story that will accomplish the purpose of revealing the heart sins of the Pharisees. Christ could have used a variety of natural disasters to communicate the helplessness of the younger son - flood, mighty storm, severe illness, or even an earthquake. Each of these could have been crafted into the story in some way to communicate the son's desperate state, but Jesus chose to use a famine. We must ask the question...Why a famine?

A Famine...By Design

It was not by mistake that Jesus used a famine. It was by design. As we have often done in previous chapters, we must put ourselves in the culture of the day to really grasp the seriousness of the situation.

While famines are relatively unheard of in our Western culture, they are a worldwide reality and would have been so in Jesus's day. In fact, famines are found often in the Scriptures, especially in the Old Testament. In Genesis 12, Abraham and Sarai experienced a famine that drove them to the fertile land of Egypt. Genesis 26 records the famine that Isaac experienced. Joseph and his brothers experienced a famine that drove them to Egypt to buy grain; God used this to reconnect Joseph with them and establish his rule over them. We find famines in Ruth, II Samuel, I and II Kings, Nehemiah, as well as Luke and Acts.

Famines serve as more than just reminders of the fragility of creation; they represent the hand of God in judging people. The Old Testament Scriptures are clear...God's powerful hand is

evident through famines. Psalm 105:16 states that God calls for famine upon the land. Isaiah 51 even describes famine as one of God's tools to bring judgment on His enemies. (II Samuel 24, Jeremiah 15, Ezekiel 5 all reinforce this idea) Famines are such a unique event because they can be brought on by so many different events that are unconnected yet come together to create a severe food shortage. For the religious in Christ's culture, the hand of Jehovah is seen through the occurrence of famine.

Famines also create a desperate need in the land. Our Westernized view of food availability keeps us from really grasping the seriousness of a crippling food shortage. We are so far removed from the production of our food (maybe with the exception of rural communities) that it would not even take a shortage of food to create a modern famine. Any serious disruptions in the financial system, the transportation network, or the power grid would bring food distribution to a halt, and millions of people in urban settings would find themselves without food in a matter of days. Chaos would ensue! In fact, this is the exact storyline for countless novels and movies because it plays on our greatest fear...the confusion and disorder that comes from having no food or water.

With all this in mind, a famine was a fitting circumstance to arise in this parable. It represented the hand of God working in the affairs of men, specifically bringing judgment to the young son. In fact, the Pharisees would think it to be completely reasonable that God would judge a son who had acted so shamefully toward his father and his community. Simply put, the

son deserved every ounce of the punishment he was receiving. This part of the parable would have pleased the Pharisees. The rebellious son was finally being brought to his knees!

Make It Personal - Finding God's Hand In Trials

I want to walk carefully here as we finish out this chapter. When we talk about finding God's hand in difficult circumstances, it's easy to miss the powerful ways that God uses our deepest valleys for his eternal purpose. We know that the prodigal son's famine was not random. It was part of God's sovereign plan to bring this wayward child to his senses. Now, this doesn't mean that every difficult circumstance in your life is divine punishment. Sometimes we suffer simply because we live in a broken world filled with broken people. Sometimes our suffering comes because of poor choices. And other times, we will never know this side of eternity, the reason for our suffering. But what we do know is this: God does not waste our suffering!

God can use the difficult circumstances that seem to be working against you today to actually work for your good. The famine that should have destroyed the prodigal son became the very tool that turned his heart back toward home. The desperation that felt like the end of his story actually became the beginning of his greater story.

In my years in ministry, I've seen this repeated many times. God takes the broken pieces of people's lives and puts them together to create something that is beautiful.

If you are in a difficult season of life right now, I want to encourage you that God has not forgotten or abandoned you in

your suffering. While your circumstances may feel overwhelming, they are not outside of God's plan or beyond his ability to use them for your good. Remember, sometimes God lets us feel the heavy weight of our circumstances so we will turn back home in our darkest valley.

Closing Prayer

Father, we come before you today broken and desperate, acknowledging that our hearts often lead us far from home. We confess that in our deepest valleys, it is hard to see your hand at work. Sometimes, Lord, our hearts feel abandoned by you when we are overwhelmed by the pain of our circumstances.

Lord, our cry to you today is from a place of desperation and need. Open our eyes so that we can see your goodness even in our valleys. Help us to understand that when we walk through our trials, you haven't abandoned us. Please give us eyes of faith to be able to see that you can use our difficulties and trials to draw us closer to you.

Lord, we are thankful that even our pathways of suffering can become pathways back to you. Lord, turn our hearts toward home and help us to trust that the plans you have laid out for us are good, even when we cannot see the goodness in them.

In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Wow...you are still here studying this with me! I want you to know that I don't take it for granted that we would take this journey through God's Word together.

Here are two ways we can continue to connect outside of this book...

1. Podcasts

My wife and I (Lorrie) host a podcast called Better Together that centers around Christian marriage and parenting. Listen...and share it with young married couples and parents.

I also host a podcast called Bible Truth for Today where we explore the timeless wisdom of Scripture and show how it applies to your life in today's culture

2. Monthly Newsletter

Every month Lorrie and I send out an encouraging word that points to Jesus and gives updates on our upcoming books and studies.

Visit djharry.org and sign up for your monthly update!

Now...back to the parable!



Chapter 7

Feeding the Swine

v. 15 And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine.

Our previous chapter ended with the prodigal son suffering through the wrath of a famine with nothing left of his inheritance. He had spent all, had nothing to his name, and all his ‘new friends’ had forsaken him! And yet, with his circumstances turning hopeless, he refused to go home. I think we often gloss over the significance of verse 15 as it relates to the attitude of the prodigal son; maybe it’s because we don’t really know what to make of it. We would think that at this point in the story, he would make the turn toward home. Yet he doesn’t. Instead, he puts together a scheme that he thinks will get him out of his predicament. Helpless. Homeless. Penniless. He refuses to humble himself and go home; he has his own plan.

Why didn’t he just go home? Because going home was the last thing this young man wanted to do! To go home was to admit failure and face the wrath of the father. He would be owning the

shame he had caused the family. He would have to face the disapproval of the community and bear the humiliation of the entire village. No. Going home was to admit failure; this young man wasn't ready to admit his own sinfulness yet.

What was his brilliant plan? It seemed simple enough in his mind and, under normal circumstances, might have provided him with enough income to make ends meet. His bright idea - let me find someone in town who needs some part-time work done, and I can make back enough money to survive. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines delusion as “a persistent false belief that is maintained despite the indisputable evidence to the contrary.” This young man was living in a delusion if he thought that he would find work during a time of famine. He refused to see how hopeless the situation was and decided to press onward with his foolish plan.

“He joined himself to a citizen of that country.”

In other words, he found a person of means. Though there was a famine in the land, there were still some people of substance who had money and influence. In fact, as this part of the story progresses, we see that this person also owned pigs and possibly other livestock. The prodigal son recognized that he needed to find a person of influence who could help him, a person with enough means to offer food and payment so that he could earn back some of the money he had lost. He just couldn't imagine that person was his father.

Isn't it sad how we can be blinded by wrong choices? The younger son is going down a path of destruction and can't even

see that there are major problems with his plan. First, there was a famine in the land. Though a person of means would still have food and finances to offer, there were probably many people who were begging for food and work. The job he hoped for, that would save his skin, simply didn't materialize. The second issue was with his nationality - he was Jewish and a foreigner. He was the one who had travelled away from his Jewish culture and home country, and now he was the stranger in the land. He wasn't a local boy looking for work; he was a beggar taking work from those who lived there.

Third, his undisciplined lifestyle would make him a poor choice for almost any type of work. He had proven himself to be disobedient, disrespectful, unthoughtful, wasteful, and prideful. Is this the type of person you would want to hire to do work around your home or business? I think not - this is the type of person you want to keep as far away as possible! Interestingly, he did end up with work; he had no idea, though, what he was in for as a young Jewish boy.

The application will become more obvious as the chapter goes on, but when we are in the depths of our sin, we can become blinded and think that we know the way out. If you are reading this and you know Jesus, what did it take for you to admit that your goodness was not enough? I could tell you story after story of people who were living in the grips of sin and were delusional in thinking that they could find a way of escape! It wasn't until they turned to Jesus that their life was changed.

There is an interesting dynamic that happens between the citizen who gave him "work" (if you can call it that) and our

prodigal son. The Greek word for ‘joined’ (κόλλα, kolla) is unique and very descriptive. It literally means that he ‘glued’ himself. It might be easy to think that the young man happened to find a generous soul who decided to help him out, but in reality, this outcast beggar found a person who had means, and he attached himself. In today’s language, we would call him a “leech”. A parasite. A freeloader. He found a person who he thought could help him out, and then ‘glued’ himself so as to get what he wanted.

I remember in my first summer as a youth pastor, we travelled to Nova Scotia, Canada, and visited a Christian camp. It was a trip that was focused on helping the camp staff prepare for a busy summer. One evening, after a long day of scraping and painting, we all headed down to the coolness of the creek to refresh our bodies. It was enlivening! The cool, clear water was stimulating to the senses, and for a few moments, we were lost in the tranquility of nature’s beauty. That is, until one of the girls yelled (at the top of her lungs, I might add), “Leech!”

As we all scrambled out of the water, it became evident that we were not the only living things enjoying that cool creek water that evening! I can’t say that it was bloody or gruesome (only two teens ended up with a leech on them), but I can say that the few leeches that did happen to attach onto legs were quickly removed...and in a frantic manner. The teens wanted those blood-suckers off of their legs right then and there!

Feeding the Pigs

What do you do when a leech (a poor beggar boy who has wasted all of his money) attaches himself to you and is only trying to use you? You send him away to feed the swine! ...and he didn't just send him out to the barn. There were no barns in ancient Palestine. Our modern American understanding of farm life has given us a grave misunderstanding of the events that are happening in this verse.

Pigs often free-roamed in the public land beyond the town borders. It would be similar to how cattle were allowed to roam freely in the early American western lands, knowing that they were owned by someone and would eventually be claimed. Swine were a free-ranging animal in this culture; going out to feed the swine meant leaving the town and heading into the surrounding land. When the citizen wanted to get rid of the leech on his leg, he flicked him off and sent him to feed the swine. This was no act of kindness. He was getting rid of a problem. Nothing in the text ever hints that the 'kind' citizen was acting out of compassion as he sent him out to feed the pigs; rather, he sent him far away to feed the pigs!

This also created incredible friction in the minds of the Pharisees; good Jews avoided anything to do with pigs! The very thought of a Jewish man being reduced to the level of feeding swine was repulsive and repugnant! It was established through the law of Moses that pigs were among the ceremonially unclean animals and had become ingrained in the minds and culture of the Jews. From a practical perspective, pigs are physically filthy as well! Even if you removed the religious angle, the thought of

being a pig farmer automatically suggests images of filth and squalor.

16 And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him.

The Husks

There is one more cultural aspect that is often overlooked and misunderstood. “He would have filled his belly with the husks...” As gross as this sounds, we often conjure up imagery of the prodigal son desiring to ‘belly up’ to the pig trough and eat the slop that the farmer had put out for them to eat. Remember, though, there is no barn, no trough, and consequently, there was no ‘slop’ for the pigs. I realize that it makes for an easy comparison to compare his condition to that of a hired hand on a pig farm, but the reality is that his condition was much worse and far more dire.

If you remember from the previous pages, swine were often let loose into the wilderness to wander around and eat whatever forage they could find. This was occurring during a famine... whatever edible food/ forage was available for humans had long been picked or gathered by people. So as the young man, our prodigal son, wandered along with the swine, he watched as they ate the only thing available for them - Karob pods. (Also spelled Carob)

The Karob pod, sometimes called a ‘locust bean’, is a small shrub in the bean family that bears long fibrous pods. While there are edible varieties today and man has created ingenious

ways to harvest the nutritional content of the pods, no such processes were used in this era. The Karob pod was worthless in regard to human consumption and was practically indigestible. Imagine sitting down to eat dinner and the waitress brings out a nice big plate of old dried okra pods. Though they are not related in any way (and I am not suggesting they are the same), tough and fibrous okra pods give a relatively good comparison to what a karob pod would provide in nutritional value. They are tough to chew, hard to swallow, nutritionally empty, and practically impossible for human digestion.

Guess what...pigs love karob pods! They may be a little tough to chew, but they have the complex digestive tract needed to break down the complex cellulose into usable energy. While they might prefer something a little more tasty, there was nothing holding them back that day from rooting around under the shrubs and filling their belly with the husks that were abundant on the ground! It didn't take long for the young man to see what was happening; the pigs were eating to their heart's content, and yet he had no one willing to even give him food to eat. The pigs were full, but he was hungry.

Was this his “rock bottom” moment?

Before we move on, let's define a very important term: rock bottom. No doubt you have heard these words - “That person finally hit rock bottom.” What does that mean? It is really simple. It describes a person who has chosen a life that has led to destruction and pain. Rock bottom describes a person who has come to the end of their path and has realized that they made a

wrong turn somewhere in the past. People at rock bottom become desperate; it is often at this point that real change can take place because people recognize their hopeless condition. People hit rock bottom for many reasons: drugs, alcohol, overwhelming debt, addictions...or for taking your portion of the family inheritance and wasting it on riotous living. It is at this point that the prodigal son has hit rock bottom!

As we come to the end of this first section of the parable, consider what our Savior has done through His teaching so far. Jesus uses His skill as a master teacher to begin shaping the story in a way that creates a specific response with the Pharisees. In fact, Jesus has described the younger son in such a way that would have infuriated the Pharisees and sharpened their anger toward the son. He disrespected his father, disregarded his culture, wasted the family inheritance, had his fill of riotous and immoral living, begged for food, and ended up wishing he could lower himself to the ground and eat with the pigs. His character was sealed in the minds of the Pharisees. They absolutely hated the younger son!

Make It Personal

The prodigal son's response in this section is all too familiar to many of us. When our life gets overwhelming and circumstances become desperate, where do you turn first? When the prodigal son was starving and friendless and he was left with nothing, he still refused to go home. Instead, he "glued" himself to anyone who would offer him a solution that did not require that he humble himself before his father. As we saw in this chapter, he

became a leech, attaching himself to whosoever and whatever would provide relief without demanding his repentance.

But we do the same thing. When we become overwhelmed by anxiety, where do we turn first? Do we reach for our phones to scroll through social media, or do we turn to God in prayer? Do we seek the comfort of our Heavenly Father, or do we fill our hours with entertainment or relationships that offer a promise but leave us empty? Here's what breaks my heart about this pattern that we find ourselves in: these solutions will never satisfy. The prodigal son found himself envying the food that he was feeding to the pigs because his plan to rescue himself had failed completely.

I want to encourage you to examine what you are holding onto instead of running to God. It may be a job where you find your identity in personal achievement. It could be in life control, where you are trying to manage every outcome of your life. It could be food, substance abuse, or behaviors that provide temporary relief but in the end offer no true satisfaction. The beautiful truth of this story, however, is that God is graciously waiting for you to come home. He doesn't need your ability to figure things out on your own, and he's not impressed by your attempts to do so. Instead, he is moved when you willingly admit that you need him. Your Father wants to lovingly welcome you back home, but it requires you to come to yourself and choose to go there.

Closing Prayer

Lord, we come before you today with hearts that are heavy with conviction, recognizing that we often "glue" ourselves to everything and everyone except for you. We confess that in our heart's desperation, we have turned to temporary solutions that will always fail us and never offer the relief that comes from your grace and mercy.

Lord, please forgive us for the times that we have exhausted every human option before we have finally decided to turn to you. Our hearts are broken that we often treat you as a last resort instead of our first refuge. Lord, we acknowledge that this is pride. Help us to see that what we think is strength in our hearts is actually weakness and that true spiritual strength is found when we admit how desperately we need you.

Lord, please give us the courage to let go of the empty hopes and dreams that we cling to and trust completely in your wonderful grace.

In Christ's name we pray, Amen.

Chapter 8



I Will Arise

17 And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! 18 I will arise and go to my father...

So far in this parable, we have seen a son choose to publicly shame his father and demand his portion of the inheritance, as if the father were dead. We have seen this young man descend into the depths of moral depravity and sink into the mire of despair and hopelessness. It is not looking good for this young man at this point in the story!

But as we move into the middle part of this parable, we need to put ourselves back into the mindset of the Pharisees who were listening to Jesus. He had just described the shocking actions of a rebellious son and all of his depraved behavior. Christ had detailed the son's defiance of the cultural norms, the wasteful spending, and the improper behavior that brought him to poverty and begging. In the mind of the Pharisees, the story

could have ended with the boy wishing to eat with the pigs. That is what he deserved. It was a righteous ending!

In a guilt/shame culture, there is little room for forgiveness. If a son has brought shame to the family, that shame must be settled. The concept of a father offering forgiveness or a son asking for forgiveness in this situation...are you kidding? That was well beyond the norms of their culture. In fact, we see this shame mentioned right there in the text, though we often miss the significance of the language: “I am no more worthy to be called thy son.” “This is my son who is dead.” The son’s actions had produced an unresolvable tension that had played itself out many times in their culture. There was to be no resolution. The son was dead to the father....and the son deserved it!

This cultural concept continues to play into the picture that is being created of the Pharisees and their ungracious spirit. There was nothing in their religious system that would allow for forgiveness and grace to the undeserving. Apart from the works of righteousness and obedience to the law, undeserving sinners had no standing with the Heavenly Father and did not deserve His mercy. To the Pharisees, the son’s rock bottom moment should have been the end of the story. Period. Thankfully, it was at the rock bottom moment that the young son recognized two things: his inability to save himself and his father’s power to deliver him from his condition.

He Came To Himself

I want us to consider a phrase in verse 17 that can cause confusion in a discussion about God’s offer of grace, but is very

clearly stated within this narrative. The uncertainty is centered around a simple phrase, “when he came to himself.” In what regard did the prodigal son/sinner come to himself? What does it mean for a sinner to come to the realization that he is in sin and that his only hope is the Father? The description given by our Lord is both clear and precise. The son, who was in the position of being dead to the father, was able to recognize his deadness. How is this possible if the son was dead? Isn’t it impossible for a dead person to think or know? Wouldn’t a person who is spiritually dead be “totally unable” to even recognize his own sinfulness?

At the center of this issue is this question: “Is sinful man able to recognize his sinfulness?” Thankfully, this passage defines for us the extent of what our deadness to the father means in regard to our salvation. Regarding our sinful state, the total depravity of man is seen through the description of the rebellious son. He rejected the goodness of the father and was living in the depths of his sin; there was no regard for the religious, ethical, or moral boundaries that he crossed as he travelled to the far country. Yet, even in the depths of that depravity, he came to himself. There are two things that this verse reveals are necessary for the “coming to yourself” moment in the life of an unbeliever.

One, it requires understanding the depths of your own sin. Since God has placed in all of mankind the conscience of good and evil (Genesis 3, Romans 1), it isn’t difficult to recognize that man can perceive his own sinfulness. Have you ever talked to an alcoholic who is drunk, a drug addict who is strung out, or a man

addicted to pornography? In that discussion, there is often a recognition of the depths to which they have fallen.

Years ago, I specifically remember talking to a man who was absolutely dominated by alcohol. He was more than a man...he was a friend. We had gone to high school together, played basketball together...we were close friends. Yet at this point in life, I was a pastor, and he was totally controlled by alcohol. He cried on my shoulder that night and bemoaned the depths that his alcohol had taken his mind and body. There was no missing the fact that he was caught in his sin, and he freely admitted it. Day after day, he recognized that alcohol was controlling his life, and he was 'feeding the swine' with his life. To say that a sinner is unable to recognize the sinfulness of his condition clearly contradicts the letter as well as the spirit of this passage.

Along with this truth comes a seeming paradox contained within the Scriptures. As we interpret the son's journey and apply it to our own journey toward redemption, it would seem that the son is acting alone and independent of the father. In other words, it seems as though he is coming to his father on his own terms, which puts the emphasis on his 'salvation experience' on man's actions as opposed to God's grace and mercy. Is this really the case?

Consider these thoughts. First, the son has proven that he is helpless to save himself. The son has demonstrated that his lifestyle is corrupt and vile, with no hint of goodness. The son has driven a wedge between the father and himself that cannot be resolved by any actions of his own. There is nothing left for him to do but turn to the father and beg for his mercy.

Second, the son demonstrates a complete dependence on his father for grace and mercy. There is no heart pride in the son's return. His heart's cry is overwhelmingly clear that he knows he can do nothing to help himself, and his father is the only one who has the resources.

Not only does the "coming to yourself" moment require an understanding of our sin, it demands a realistic view of the Father's goodness! It wasn't just a recognition of his sin that would put the son on the repentance road; it was the knowledge that there was someone who was able to meet his need! "How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!" The prodigal son recognized that all he needed was already provided by the father for those under his care. There was no earning the father's mercy. There was no deserving the father's mercy. The son could only make the turn toward home and place himself under the mercy of the father.

There is a wonderful peace in knowing that salvation is not of our own merits but rather by the effectual work of Jesus Christ on the cross. As the hymn states, "nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling! God, I am unable, but you are able! This is the bad news/ good news of salvation. I am a sinner and unable to save myself, and yet there is one greater than I that has more than enough to provide for my needs! Amen!

He Remembered the Father

Another very important aspect of the son's turn toward home is assumed in the passage but cannot be assumed in man's

salvation. There must be a knowledge of the goodness of the Father! The son's turn toward home was facilitated by two truths: I can't do for myself, and there is one who can! He knew of his father's resources, and he knew that he freely gave them to those who were his servants. The son glanced toward home and longed for the good grace of the father. With that in mind, can man be saved apart from a knowledge of the grace of God? We are talking about a very specific grace that God has shown mankind....the unmerited favor accessible to man through Christ's sacrifice on the cross. There must come a point when we are aware of the radical grace of the Father and choose to run toward home!

But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him. For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life. -Romans 5:8-10

Is it possible for a man to be reconciled to God apart from the knowledge of Jesus Christ? In the same way that the son only knew to turn in faith toward the father because he knew of his goodness, man can only come to God through knowledge of the goodness of Jesus Christ. I am reminded of Romans 10:14, which states, "How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?"

Notice how the emphasis is placed on the belief as a result of the hearing! We see this pattern all throughout the gospels as the followers of Christ begin sharing their faith with others; it is a pattern that is seen clearly in the testimony of Phillip and the Ethiopian's conversion.

Phillip and Radical Grace

It is in Acts 8 that we read of the interaction between Phillip and this man. I remember hearing this passage preached numerous times as a young child. My parents are missionaries, and as many missionaries do, we travelled on deputation for a little over two years. During that time, I heard my dad preach week after week, and inevitably, he landed on the same sermon on numerous occasions. Acts 8 seemed to be a favorite as he preached a sermon titled "3 Men on the Road to Gaza." The first man is the Ethiopian; he is sitting in his chariot with the Scriptures opened to Isaiah.

Phillip sees him reading and confused, so he asks him if he understands what he is reading. Of course, the answer is no. "How can I, except some man should guide me?" His plea is simple; I don't know what I am reading unless some man (who turns out to be Phillip) guides me through the Scriptures. The Ethiopian man is lost, confused, and completely unaware of the wonderful grace that is offered to him through Jesus Christ.

It is at this point in the story that Phillip leads him to learn of the radical grace of the Father! They begin reading. "He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and like a lamb dumb before his shearer, so opened he not his mouth." The man turned to Phillip

and asked a simple question: “Of whom speaketh the prophet this? of himself, or of some other man?” We see the third man introduced at this point in the story. I can still see the excitement on my dad’s face when he would get to this part of the sermon; Philip opened his mouth “...and preached unto him Jesus!”

You see, there is no gospel without Jesus! A sinner will remain lost in his sin until he knows about the gracious and merciful work of Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary. As sinners born in sin, there has to be a point where we are introduced to Jesus, just as this unsaved Ethiopian was that day.

In our parable, we see the same truth played out in the younger son. It was the knowledge of the father’s love that brought clarity to his thinking and pointed him toward home. The son came to himself and recognized two things: his own sin and the love of the father.

18 I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, 19 And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants.

The Son’s Prayer

Among the issues surrounding salvation that often causes confusion and disagreement is the discussion involving the ‘sinner’s prayer.’ I was first introduced to this issue when I was in upper elementary school. We moved to a new city and immediately began looking for a church to call our home. Over time, our family settled in a local church that had an incredible outreach/evangelism program that was the clear focus of the

entire ministry; it quickly became the focus of our family also, as the family faithfully attended weekly ‘soul winning’ and as I personally did my best to never miss out on teen visitation. Over time, though, I began noticing something different with my parents. The excitement that had surrounded our first few years in the church faded quickly. I could tell that there was some issue that was stealing their joy. Sadly, the day came when we attended our final service. That evening, my parents sat down with me and my two sisters and explained the issue.

The issue was something I came to know as ‘easy believism.’ A focus on praying a prayer, but little focus on the heart cry of faith that must accompany that prayer. I had unknowingly been trained that the most important part of the gospel message was getting a person to the point where they repeat the prayer. I remember the training...I remember the emphasis. Get them to pray the prayer....or as I somewhat jokingly say today: one-two-three..repeat after me!

My parents were thankful for the emphasis placed on reaching the lost, but equally as bothered by the overemphasis on the ‘sinner's prayer’ as the means of salvation. I remember saying numerous times, “If you want to be saved, just pray this prayer after me.” It was so ingrained into our ‘routine’ that the prayer became the mode of salvation as opposed to a heart cry of faith. I’m thankful that my parents had enough discernment and courage to take a stand on such a crucial issue surrounding the gospel.

With all that being said, Scripture does speak of a prayer of the heart regarding salvation. Romans 10:13 is often used as the

foundational text dealing with this issue. “For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

In my opinion, no one brought more awareness to the concept of a sinner's prayer in our generation than a man named Billy Graham. He led an estimated 2.2 million people through this prayer at his crusades that reached over 215 million people all across the globe. They would repeat:

“Dear Lord Jesus, I know that I am a sinner, and I ask for Your forgiveness. I believe You died for my sins and rose from the dead. I turn from my sins and invite You to come into my heart and life. I want to trust and follow You as my Lord and Savior. In Your Name. Amen.”³

Is this what the “sinners' prayer” should look like? When a person truly desires to come to Christ in faith, what should the prayer of the heart look like? Step back with me for a few moments, and let's examine what I believe is the closest example of a sinner's prayer that we find in Scripture: the prayer of the prodigal son.

The Son's Simple Words

Remember, the foundation for the prodigal son's prayer was established in the previous pages: he recognized his own depravity and knew of the father's ability to save him. With that foundation in place, he prepares for the journey home, knowing

³ Billy Graham, <https://peacewithgod.net> (accessed 07/11/2018)

that he will have to face the just wrath of the father and a culture that he has scorned through his rebellious actions. His prayer is short and simple. “Father, I have sinned. I am not worthy to be a son. I ask that you would allow me to just be your servant.” The prodigal son is communicating some very deep truths in these simple words!

In his prayer, we catch an incredible glimpse into the heart of a repentant sinner. First, he is admitting his own sin. “Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee.” The heart’s cry for salvation must involve a recognition of our sinful state; without sin, there is no need for a Savior or redemption.

Second, he communicates a state of dependence. He is asking the father to do for him what he cannot do for himself. Third, his prayer is a vehicle of humility. “...And am no more worthy to be called thy son:” When a sinner comes to God, there can be no pride or pretension. Salvation that is deserved or earned is not Biblical salvation. Finally, the younger son recognized that he did not deserve to be loved and accepted as a son; his request was to be allowed to just live as a servant and nothing more.

What we are witnessing in these verses is the heart cry of a repentant sinner! “God, I know that I am a sinner, and I deserve your wrath. I place myself at your mercy and ask for your grace.” As a side note, we know this represents a heart prayer because he isn’t standing in front of the father yet. He is all alone in a strange country, recognizing the depths of his despair and inability to save himself. If the prayer for salvation doesn’t start

in the heart, it is powerless to save; prayers don't save, Jesus Christ saves!

When you are sharing the gospel with an unbeliever and they are at the point of faith, do you skip praying? The answer is no! Prayer is our mode of conversation with God, and the prayer of a repentant sinner is a cause for rejoicing in heaven! However, there are no magic words in Christianity. Becoming a child of God doesn't happen through a repeated set of words or phrases any more than drawing close to God through vain repetitions. When someone comes to their point of faith, the prayer of the sinner becomes a heart cry for mercy and grace.

No two people will communicate their heart cry to God the same way. Instead of 'leading them in prayer', allow that person to simply pray to God from their own heart. It's possible they might resist initially. In fact, often they will say "but I don't know what to say!" Assure them, comfort them...there are no right words!! Pray from your heart! That is what the prodigal son did!

A Model of Repentance

Since we are discussing the turn of the prodigal son, the father's radical grace, a short conversation on repentance is in order... and it is found right here in the story. Repentance is actually a simple Scriptural concept; to 'repent' (from the Greek μετανοέω - metanoëo) simply means "to reconsider" or "to think differently." It connotes a change of mind that is seen in a change of direction/lifestyle throughout the Gospel record.

The story of Zacchaeus perfectly illustrates repentance; his turning away from his sinful lifestyle and his turning toward the

path of righteousness is the very repentance that Jesus spoke when He said “except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.” (Luke 13:5) In Zaccheus’s case, he was confronted with the reality of his sin and came to the point where he agreed with Jesus’s perspective. Repentance isn’t a separate event that happens during conversion. It is an integral part of the turning from sin and toward God!

Another powerful illustration of repentance is found right here in our text. The prodigal son perfectly demonstrates the repentance of a heart that turns from sin and toward the grace of the loving father. As we have seen in previous chapters, this point in the story finds him an outcast of the father, apart from his provision, and living in the squalor of his sin. He is helpless and hopeless. We read, however, of the moment that he comes to himself. There is a recognition of the desperation of his condition and the wonderful provision that is available through the father. Why is his condition so desperate? Because he had followed his own path, the pathway of rebellion always leads us down the road to destruction.

To really see the repentance of the younger son, we have to see the radical turn that he was making through this move toward home. What was the old ‘plan’?

- Give me the portion of goods that belongs to me.
- I reject you and choose to go my own way.
- Life is about my pleasure and sinful satisfaction.
- There is a famine? I can save myself!

Now compare that to the new ‘plan’ that he sets forth in these verses:

- I recognize my sin.
- I realize that my actions are the cause of my brokenness
- I am helpless without the grace of my father.
- I am unworthy of any goodness from my father.

A Visual of Repentance

Do you notice how he was going one way with his life choices and made a full 180-degree turn! The prodigal son actually gives us a visual illustration of what happened in the heart of Zacchaeus when he met the Savior. Before, he was a cheat and a thief. Afterward, he restored what he had taken fourfold and began a life of looking toward others and not himself. As the younger son made his turn toward home, he demonstrated an incredible truth about the salvation of mankind: the necessity of repentance.

Please understand, though, the turn away from his sin did not restore him to his father’s fellowship – it was the gracious work of the father. Period. There was no goodness seen in the son’s turn toward home, only his inability to save himself from the chaos his decisions had created. He was no more restored after he turned than when he turned...it wasn’t the repentance that offered him grace, it was the father!

His turn toward home demonstrates another very important aspect of repentance...repentance demands a focus, a pivot on

which ‘the turn’ takes place. This wonderful pivot point is called faith!

Sit under the preaching of 10 different pastors, and you will hear 10 different but similar calls to respond: repent, submit, believe, come, pray. We see this same pattern in the Gospels. When John the Baptist was preaching in the wilderness of Judea, his call to respond was simple: “Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matthew 3:1-3) Peter seemed to preach the same message while urging the listeners at Pentecost to “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins.” (Luke 2:38) Paul’s message to the Athenians seems to be in parallel with the previous examples as he commanded “all men every where to repent:” (Acts 17:30)

On the other hand, we hear a call to believe also in the Scriptures. For example, in Acts 16, Paul and Silas are in prison as the angel causes an earthquake and the doors to open. The jailor, thinking that all the prisoners had escaped, looks down the sharp end of his sword and is moments away from taking his life. Paul and Silas assure him that they are still there; he is overwhelmed with emotion and conviction. “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” Paul’s answer is simple. “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house.” (Acts 16:31) In Acts 17, we see that Paul not only told the Athenians to repent but also went on to describe them as those who believed. Were Paul’s own words in contradiction to his own teaching? Which is it?

Is it repent or believe?

All of the confusion is made clear when we consider the words of our Savior; His words are straightforward and authoritative. “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel.” (Mark 1:15) Notice how Jesus put both together! Both repentance and belief are essential to salvation. In a sense, repentance and faith are closely connected and function as two sides to the same coin. Faith demands a turn from the path of sin, and the turn toward the Father’s grace demands faith in the Father’s ability to rescue! Neither can exist without the other! It is clear that faith and repentance cannot happen without the other - they can’t be separated!

In essence, repentance and faith are the same action but from a different perspective. From God’s perspective, the turn of faith is seen in my willingness to accept my sin for what it is and to agree with God that the only way to obtain salvation is through Jesus Christ. From man’s perspective, as we turn from our sin and agree with God about our sinful state, there must be a focus to which we turn; there must be an object on which we set our spiritual gaze. That focus is a faith in Christ and his offer of radical grace.

Heart Check - The Prayer of a Broken Heart

There is something that is inherently beautiful about the simplicity of the prodigal son's prayer. I believe it gets to the heart of what it means to truly approach God directly. There was no deep theological language. There is no attempt to impress the father. It just contains raw and honest desperation. This is what

true prayer looks like. Simple. When all of our pride has been stripped away and you're left with nothing but a desperate need for God's grace and mercy...that is when we are able to reach the heart of God.

I want you to consider how different this is from the way we often approach prayer to God. We can become so concerned with using the right words and sounding spiritual that we forget that God is more interested in the condition of our hearts than the style of our words. God isn't looking for word-perfection in our prayers. He's looking for a humble and broken heart. The prodigal son simply acknowledged three truths in his prayer: I have sinned, I am unworthy, I desperately need your mercy, and that was enough for God.

Maybe you've been carrying burdens that feel too heavy to bring to God. Maybe you have convinced yourself that your situation is too complicated for a simple prayer. I hope the prodigal son's example encourages you that God doesn't need you to have all of your words figured out before you come to him. He just wants you to come honestly and acknowledge your desperate condition.

If you have never truly prayed a prayer like this, then maybe today is the day to do so. God isn't interested in perfect prayers from perfect people. He's drawn to broken and contrite hearts. Don't worry about having the right words when you pray. Just be honest about your condition and circumstances, acknowledge that you are completely dependent on his mercy and grace, and then trust that the same grace that the father offered to the son is more than sufficient to meet your needs.

Closing Prayer

Father, we come before you today like the prodigal son, with humble and broken hearts. Thank you for not demanding perfection in our prayers. Thank you for looking beyond our words and into our souls.

We acknowledge that we have sinned against heaven and that we have tried our own solutions ...and we come to you desperate for your mercy. Please strip away the pride of our heart and help us to pray with the raw honesty of souls that are completely dependent on your grace.

Thank you for not requiring perfect prayers from perfect people, but for being drawn to broken hearts that are desperate for you. Like the prodigal son, we cry out: "Father, I've sinned. I am unworthy. Please have mercy on me."

Thank you for hearing the prayer of our desperate hearts.

In Christ's name, amen.

Chapter 9



The Father Ran

20 And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.

Often great pieces of literature will have a climactic pivot point....a scene burned into our memory that forever changes how we view the characters and their journey. Sometimes it completely changes the plot of the story. It's like when Frankenstein turns on Victor and begins his destructive quest. Did you even realize that Frankenstein wasn't a monster at the beginning of the movie? He was innocent, gentle, kind... nothing like what we think of the creature depicted in our minds. But...there was a turning point in his story...a moment when the story changed and he was transformed.

We have reached that point of transformation in this story... and it is glorious!! The beauty of the father's radical grace is on full display in this portion of the narrative; it is contrasted with the unworthiness and vile behavior of the son.

Let us pause for a moment and reflect back on the full context of the son and father in this parable; remember, Christ is using the story of the rebellious/lost son to expose the coldness to the gospel within the heart of the Pharisees. He has masterfully woven together cultural and community connections that have deepened and colored the narrative; these cultural associations also create an emotional connection to the events that are unfolding. To a parent who has tragically lost a child, a story about a child who perishes would stir up deep emotions. To a spouse who has been the victim of unfaithfulness, a story of adultery would bring up intense feelings and create a certain heart reaction. To a Pharisee that is steeped in the law and cultural appropriateness, the story that Jesus has crafted has drawn them in and set them up for a bitter moment of truth.

At this point in the parable, there would have been feelings of anger and hatred toward the rebellious son. The Pharisees would have been enraged. His disregard for the father was despicable and heinous. As Christ unfolds the son's demise, it would have been satisfying for them to see his 'rock bottom' moment unfold. Why? Because he deserved to be at rock bottom! He deserved to be an outcast. He had turned his back on his family and community; to see him starving, begging, and feeding the pigs was a fitting end to a son who had acted as he had. Vulnerable, exposed, and empty: the Pharisees' anger would have been appeased to see the younger son come to these ends.

It was equally satisfying to see the son admit how powerless he was to save himself. As Christ verbalized the son's 'come to himself' moment, there would have been an overwhelming

sense of noble justice in their minds. Not only did he end up with the pigs, but he also realized that it was his fault, and his only recourse was to come home begging. In the prodigal son's prayer, he stated that he was unworthy to be called a son. He was begging to be reinstated as a slave with no rights as a son. The Pharisees would have agreed wholeheartedly!

The Setup

What happened next, however, would have taken them completely off guard. In a sense, Jesus had set them up perfectly by slightly putting their hearts at ease. He had brought them to a point in the story where the conclusion was in sight and yet included a turn of events so offensive to their culture that the entire balance of the parable rested on these verses. Before we consider what was exceedingly offensive, can we guess how the parable should have ended at this point to satisfy the Pharisee's sense of cultural justice?

Here it is...the younger son comes to himself and realizes that his only recourse is to admit full guilt and beg for the father's mercy...and the father offers no mercy and rejects the son's repentance.

The cultural expectation was simple: no mercy. Incredible shame had been brought on the family by the son's actions; honor had to be restored. The son must be brought to shame by the father and shunned by the community. In fact, in their version of justice, the father might not even be the first one to deal with the shame upon the son's arrival back home. It was

quite common for the community folks to rally around the shamed family and act on their behalf to restore honor.

Not only did the culture recognize this type of ‘justice’ as appropriate, but there were Biblical laws on rebellion as well. As this young man was preparing to walk back into town to beg for mercy, the Pharisees were mentally preparing for him to be shunned, shamed, and possibly stoned for his rebellious actions. In their minds, this would be the fitting end for Christ’s story. Instead, a shocking turn of events was in store.

No Mercy

Luke 15:20 And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.

This was not the reaction that the Pharisees were looking for; there was an insatiable appetite for cultural resolution, and this did not satisfy that appetite! Though this was just a story, Christ had woven in such intricate cultural connections that they couldn’t help but be drawn into the emotion of the moment. In the same way that the Pharisees were moved in their spirit when Stephen laid bare the cultural shame of Jewish leaders, their hearts would have been seething with indignation toward the son.

The son did not deserve the Father’s mercy! Period! He deserved no mercy!

We know this was their reaction because this was the very spiritual response that the Pharisees were guilty of in the opening verses of Luke 15...and our Savior was aiming to point it out through this parable. There was a desire to see sinners pushed away from the love of our Savior. Sinners did not deserve his time and attention. The Pharisees would become angry and secretly murmur at the favor being shown to an undeserving class of people. Their case was simple; there was no other groundwork needed other than to make the cultural claim against our Lord. Luke 15:2 states that the “scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them.” No evidence was needed, and no further explanation was required. The receiving of sinners was a violation of their code of morality. In the same sense, the receiving of the son would have been equally as offensive to their cultural morality. This was accentuated by the fact that the father was eagerly waiting for the son’s return!

There are a few interesting thoughts about this portion of the parable. To begin with, Christ describes the father as seeing him (the returning son) a great way off. The passage clearly communicates an anticipation that the son will return, and the father is waiting, longing for the restored fellowship with his wayward child! This wasn’t a forced return, either. The son had to come to himself.

I think it goes without saying that the father in our story had ample resources to go and retrieve his son by force. He could have sent a convoy of servants to find his wayward child and irresistibly bring him back home. The father himself could have

met the son in the field and commanded that he return. Culturally, the father could have demanded his son return, and the father's wishes would have been carried out. That, however, is not the picture that our Lord paints of the father's love. Rather, we see that the father's love is patient, anticipating that the son will "come to himself" as is described in the previous verses.

Some would say that this view of the father (the Savior) diminishes his sovereignty and power. They would state that in order to be sovereign, God must actively decree all that will come to pass and that nothing happens that He has not ordained. This clearly does not fit the teaching on salvation that Jesus gives in this passage. Does it? Did the father force the son to come home? Did the father demand that the son be brought home against his will? No. In this passage, we see a father who patiently waits for the son to come to himself and then make the turn back toward home.

The Father Ran!

Did you notice the first action of the father in the story? He ran to meet his wayward son! Not only was there an anticipation of the son's return, but there was a reaching out to meet him on his journey back home. The father didn't waste any time; he ran with haste to meet his son! This, as well, would be highly suspect in their culture; men of wealth and means would not stoop themselves to running down the road. That was the action of a child. It was shameful for a man of dignity to run down the road. If the need was indeed great, a man of his standing would send a

servant to do their bidding, send their greeting, or welcome their guests.

Not this time. The father pulled up his robe and took off to meet his son! How could this be? The appropriate cultural reaction would have been to react in anger. The father should have refused to meet the son! There was no honor in running to meet a rebellious child. Only shame. The father brought shame upon himself.

While this may seem like a small part of the reunion story, there is an incredible truth that is illustrated through the father's hurried dash to meet the son. To grasp that truth, we have to remember the intense cloud of shame that the son left behind. Having turned his back on his family, his father, and his culture, the son walked away in rebellious defiance. The shame and embarrassment of the family and the community would have rippled outward into the countryside; the son left in a way that he could never return home. To walk back into town would bring harsh and swift 'justice' at the hands of the angry community. He did not deserve to be a son. Nothing would change that reality.

Nothing would change that reality except the humble and compassionate actions of the father. The father didn't just run because he was full of excitement; he ran to protect his son from the harsh reaction of an angry community. In essence, the father took the shame of the son on himself. I am reminded of Hebrews 12:2, which states, "Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God." Jesus endured the cross and took upon

himself the shame of our sin. He took our shame so that we could be brought back into fellowship with God!

For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. -Romans 5:7-8

Had Compassion

From our cultural perspective, this part of the story is simply breathtaking. To see the father patiently waiting for the return of the wayward son is such a beautiful picture of compassion and mercy! The son deserved nothing but shame and rejection, and yet the father gave him only kindness and sympathy. Our western culture rejoices in undeserved kindness; if there ever was an undeserving son, it was this young man! The father's unexpected reaction to the son is evidenced through the use of a very colorful word that helps us to see what was going on inside the father's emotions; the father was moved with compassion.

What exactly is compassion? Is it mercy? Is it grace? It actually goes much deeper than those and is best understood when we understand that the Greek word from which it is translated (σπλαγχνίζομαι *splagchnizomai*) literally means "to yearn deep in the bowels." This is a feeling of care and concern that touches you on the inside. This level of compassion is driven by a deep sense of love and empathy; it occurs when the emotional concern is so deep that it crosses over to the physical.

Picture a mother clutching the motionless hand of her only son as the doctors work frantically to revive him. Countless

books and movies have centered around the deep-seated emotional reaction that a parent has for their hurting child. Our culture glories in love that deep! The father's compassion was so deep that he was moved to empty himself of pride. There was no holding back the outward show of his inward compassion as he dropped his outer garment and began running with outstretched arms toward his returning son. In fact, he was so focused on the happy reunion that he offered forgiveness and reconciliation before the son had said one single word!

From our cultural perspective, this part of the story is breathtaking. To the Pharisees, however, this would have been viewed much differently. There was no honor in this type of forgiveness. There was no honor in reconciliation.

This story was not going the way they thought it would.

Heart Check - The Grace Embrace

One of the more powerful moments of this story is when the father saw his son while he was a great way off. Did you catch that? This wasn't just fortunate timing; the father was anticipating his son's return. He had been looking down that dusty road day after day, hoping that his son would return. And when the silhouette of his boy appeared on the horizon, the father did not hesitate, but he ran to meet him. And even before the son could get his words of repentance out, and before he could demonstrate any outward change... the father was already offering grace, mercy, and forgiveness! This is the heart of your Father toward you. His love isn't reactive; it is proactive. He doesn't wait for you to clean up your life before he offers you

grace and mercy. He responds with compassion while you are still on your way home. He's already running toward you!

In our performance-driven culture, we believe that people always get what they deserve. But the father's sprint down that long dusty driveway teaches us a different truth: God's grace is given to us when we do not deserve it. Maybe you've been hesitating to approach God because you feel that your life is too broken. Maybe you have believed Satan's lie that you need to get your life together first before you can expect your Heavenly Father to embrace you.

The father's grace-filled embrace in this story shatters those assumptions into a thousand pieces. God is not waiting for you to clean up your life before he will meet you on the road home. The radical grace of the Father humbles us because it reveals that there's nothing that we can do to earn God's grace and favor. It's already there, it's already available, and the Father is already running.

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, the picture of you running toward me while I am still far off is overwhelming. I've spent so much of my life thinking that I needed to earn your love before approaching you. I have spent so many days right at the edge of your grace, convinced that my life was too broken to deserve your love. God, please forgive me for underestimating the depth of your mercy and grace. ...and while I was coming up with the right words to say, you were already in motion, running toward me.

Thank you for loving the mess of my life and meeting me on the dusty road of my failures rather than waiting for me to fix up my life first. Lord, I don't think I could ever understand the kind of grace that you offer toward me, but I'm thankful for it. I desperately need it. Thank you for loving me even before I loved you, even before I knew that I needed you.

In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Chapter 10

Sonship Restored

Luke 15:22-24 But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry: For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry.

As we saw in the previous chapter, the Pharisee's reaction to the events so far would be pure astonishment. Bewilderment. There was no room in their culture for the father to offer forgiveness like he did. The shame that the father took on himself was unprecedented; the son deserved to suffer considerable shame for the dishonor he had brought on the family name. Instead of shame, though, the father responds with radical grace. There are two definitions of grace that have stuck with me through the years.

The first is an acronym of the word G.R.A.C.E. ... God's Riches At Christ's Expense. This definition describes the favor that our God demonstrated through Jesus on the cross and is

specific to salvation. To understand grace, though, it is helpful to look at the second broader definition: God's unmerited favor.

We see two examples of grace in this part of the passage, and each is undeserved and comes from the Father. First, the father gives the son what can only be described as a hero's arrival! It was a "spare no expense" and "no holds barred" kind of reception that the son received right there in front of his house. We haven't even made it to the real celebration, and the father is snapping out orders to bring out the best clothing, the family jewelry, and to make ready for a family feast. There was no hesitation in the father's welcome; it was immediate and complete!

The second act of grace that we see in this passage is that the son who was dead, the one who had been disowned and had walked away in shame, was immediately restored to the position of sonship. With no expectation of an explanation and without any hesitancy, the father announces to the entire village that "this is my son, who was dead, and is alive again." It is hard, even in our culture, to comprehend this act of grace and immediate restoration. Surely the son had "some explaining to do!" Most fathers in this circumstance would have demanded an explanation or at least set some ground rules for the son to return. Do you remember the son's prayer to his father? Even he recognized that he didn't deserve to be called a son, and so he only requested to be a servant. Sonship was out of the question! Sonship would be the ultimate demonstration of unmerited favor from his father.

In the same way that the prodigal son was immediately granted all the rights and privileges of sonship, God immediately grants to sinners the position of sonship at the point of salvation. Paul states in Galatians 3:6-7... “Even as Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness. Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham.” Paul is clear that the adoption of sons comes at the point of regeneration, a result of saving faith and a heart of repentance. Paul goes on in verse 26 to say, “For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus.” Sonship is immediate and complete. There is no middle ground where sonship is earned...it is a gift freely given!

Robe, Ring, Shoes, Calf

Immediately the father uses four items to declare the immediate sonship of his wayward child. These are four items that mean very little to our culture, but to the audience of Jesus, they each had a unique place in society and culture. To us, it would be like a boy/young man waking up on the day that he turns 18 years old to find a key ring with a solitary key sitting on his dresser. As the energetic 18-year-old runs with excitement, he opens the door to find that mom and dad have bought him the greatest gift an 18-year-old could get...his own car! It represents independence and maturity, responsibility and ownership. It might look like a pile of nuts and bolts to those driving by, but to this young man, it is the most beautiful car he has ever laid eyes on...because it is his!

Gifts have cultural meaning. To us, a car represents independence. Clothes represent growth. Toys tell us of youth.

Flowers tell us of love. Jewelry demonstrates commitment. A lump of coal or an old fruitcake means that you have friends with a great sense of humor! No matter the gift, we walk away from opening a present and recognize that it has communicated something about the relationship between the giver and the receiver.

It was no different in Jesus's day; the giving of gifts had significance. Could it be that each of the gifts that Jesus listed was given on purpose and had significance within the parable? With a little study, we see that each item had a purpose in their culture, and Jesus was communicating truth through those items.

Best Robe

First, the father calls for the servants to bring forth the "best robe." When we see the word 'best', we can actually come to different conclusions based on what we think is best. Is cleanest best? Is the most expensive the best? Is the most ornate the best?

The Greek word for *best* means the 'foremost in importance' or 'chief'. It wasn't just an important jacket or an important headdress; it was the foremost robe in the house that was a mark of dignity. What robe in the house would have been the 'best robe' other than the father's own robe? Imagine the servants slowly opening up their master's closet and removing his best robe to bring out and place on the returning son.

Pause for a moment and remember that each part of this parable is given as a parallel of how God relates to a sinner who comes to repentance. This just might be the most beautiful picture of our salvation in the entire parable! At salvation, Christ

placed his righteousness over my sinful flesh so that in God's eyes I stand justified!

His robes for mine: O wonderful exchange!
Clothed in my sin, Christ suffered 'neath God's rage.
Draped in His righteousness, I'm justified.
In Christ I live, for in my place He died.⁴

The Ring

The second gift that the father gives is a ring. I'm pretty sure that we see at least some significance in the ring; even our culture values the personal gift of jewelry. A ring in their culture didn't so much signify the relationship as it demonstrated authority. Rings, or signets, were worn by those in authority and communicated their total command. Do you remember in Genesis 41 when Pharaoh took the ring off his own finger and gave it to Joseph? It wasn't a gift of kindness or a display of friendship; in that moment, Pharaoh elevated Joseph from a common prisoner to ruler over all the land of Egypt! We see the exact same thing happen in Esther 8 when the king gave his ring to Mordecai. Mordecai was lifted up in authority and was given the power to rule in the king's stead. The ring wasn't decoration - it was authority!

When the prodigal son put out his hand and received the ring of the father, he was given all the authority entitled to a son. He was not a servant or a slave as he had requested; all the power of the father was now available to the son through this one gift.

⁴ Anderson, Chris. His Robes for Mine. Copyright 2008, ChurchWorksMedia.com

Shoes

The third gift was shoes. This one is probably the most difficult to understand because shoes have taken on such a different role for us in our culture. We take for granted that we will have shoes for our feet. Other than a child who is running barefoot because he hates wearing shoes, it is pretty abnormal for us to see people walking barefoot in our American culture. The son likely returned wearing no shoes with his feet bare to the elements; this was common among the poor and desperate in their culture. Shoes are just a need. The shoes from this passage were probably just sandals and most likely weren't anything more. Nothing more than a simple need. The lesson from the shoes is simple - God sees the needs of the sinner and treats them with mercy and love.

The Fatted Calf

Finally, the father calls for the fatted calf! The first-century Palestinian diet rarely included meat. It's not that they didn't eat meat, just that it was reserved for special occasions. Historic and literary evidence points to a society that centered around food such as grain, dried fruits, vegetables, and fish. As we see later in the story, the older son and many of the servants were out in the fields tending to the crops. This is what we would expect them to be doing as opposed to tending herds. This is a calf, then, that is being 'fatted' for a special celebration...and a special celebration has been declared!

Prodigal...what does it really mean?

This brings us to a very interesting and yet crucial word definition from our text. In fact, it is a phrase from our story that is often taken out of context, even though the word is never used within the text of the parable at all! Are you confused? Well, we have referred to the younger son as the “prodigal son” with regularity, and the parable itself bears that title. Countless times, we have referred to a wayward child as a “prodigal son” in the context of his rebellion and defiance of his parents. Sit down and take a deep breath. “Prodigal” has nothing to do with defiance! The word prodigal means “characterized by profuse or wasteful expenditure: lavish.”⁵ Did you notice that there is no mention of rebellion? The prodigal nature of the younger son was not connected at all to how he treated his father; it is a description of his wastefulness and exorbitant spending.

With that in mind, there are actually two people in this text who are prodigal. Obviously, the younger son is wasteful in how he squandered the family inheritance. The father, though, is equally as prodigal! Can you imagine referring to this as the “Parable of the Prodigal Father?” It could be called that! As we saw in the previous pages, the father was lavish in his response to the son’s return, sparing no expense to bring out the best gifts and a massive feast to celebrate his return. We know this for two reasons.

First, it is clear in the story that the father overwhelmed his son with compassion and mercy as he bestowed upon him all the

⁵ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prodigal>

rights of sonship. Secondly, when we step back and remember the big picture, this fits exactly what Jesus was trying to communicate within the text. There is extravagant rejoicing in heaven over one sinner that comes to repentance in the same way that the father held nothing back as he rejoiced over the return of his son!

What was the cause of this great celebration? What was the focus of the father's prodigal celebration? Jesus describes the son's return from two different perspectives, both giving incredible insight into the condition of man before salvation and after. First, the father says that his son was "dead" and is now "alive." Second, he describes the son as "lost" and now "found." Since each describes a sinner before and after salvation, we know that they are parallel illustrations. What does it mean for a sinner to be dead and lost? How about alive and found?

Spiritually Dead?

Looking at this passage, I find myself wrestling with one of the more debated questions in theology: What does it really mean to be "dead in trespasses and sins"?

For years, I've heard well-meaning believers argue that spiritual death renders us completely unable to respond to God's call—like Lazarus in the tomb, lifeless and unresponsive until Christ spoke life into him. "Dead men can't hear," they say, "and dead men can't respond."

The logic seems sound at first: if we're truly dead spiritually, then we must be as helpless as a corpse until God sovereignly breathes life into us. But as I've studied this passage more deeply,

I've come to believe there's a fundamental problem with this interpretation. We're comparing two entirely different realms—the physical and the spiritual—and assuming they operate identically. When Jesus raised Lazarus from physical death, He was demonstrating His power over the physical realm and pointing to the future resurrection of believers. It was a miracle of the body, not the soul.

Here's what strikes me most powerfully: Jesus Himself gives us the clearest picture of spiritual death in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The father declares, "This my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found." Yet what kind of deadness was this? The son was dead to his family—disowned, separated, cast aside by his community. He had brought such shame that he was considered as good as dead. But notice something crucial: he was still capable of "coming to himself." He could recognize his desperate condition. He could remember his father's goodness. He could choose to turn toward home.

This is the deadness of sin; not the inability to respond, but the reality of separation. We are born spiritually separated from God, living in rebellion, cut off from the fellowship we were created to enjoy. Yet even in this condition, when confronted with the truth of the Gospel, we can recognize our need and turn in faith toward our heavenly Father.

The beauty of salvation isn't that God forces us to come against our will, but that He patiently waits for us to come to ourselves and realize that only He can meet our deepest need. Like the father in the parable, He runs to meet us when we turn

toward home—not because He dragged us there, but because His love drew us to Himself.

This understanding fills me with wonder rather than confusion. God's grace is so powerful that it can reach even the spiritually dead and awaken within us a desire for the life only He can give.

Heart Check - When God Exceeds Our Greatest Hopes

The prodigal son's prayer reveals something very powerful about our human nature; even when we are in our moments of desperation, we will still try to limit God's grace. This young man, who had wasted everything he had and found himself feeding the pigs, came up with what he thought was a reasonable request for his father. "Make me as one of your hired servants." He convinced himself that being a servant to his father was the best he could ever hope for, and that he had forfeited any right to being treated as a son forever. This was a realistic outcome in his mind, maybe even generous. He knew his father would not want him back as a son, but just maybe he would allow him back into the home as a servant.

Have you ever found yourself approaching God with this same limited vision of his grace? We create special prayers, humble requests. We develop these reasonable expectations that are based on what we think we deserve from our Heavenly Father. We may be asking for forgiveness, but we are doing so under a cloud of shame and guilt. We have convinced ourselves that we know the boundaries of the Father's grace and that we can predict the limits of his love.

We come to the throne of grace asking for his crumbs when the Father is ready to welcome us to the table. Did you see what happened when the son finally made it home? The father did not receive him as a servant, but rather he embraced him as a son. He gave him his own robe, he put a ring on his finger, shoes on his feet, and ordered the fatted calf to be prepared for a celebration. The son came home thinking he would be a servant and was immediately restored to the position of sonship with all the rights and privileges that it contained.

This is how God responds to your faith. No matter how broken and ashamed you are, as you come to the Father asking to just be a servant, he responds with open arms and lavishly heaps his grace on you. When you expect the judgment of the Father, he runs towards you with open arms. God doesn't just meet your expectations of grace and mercy, he overwhelms them with a divine kindness that far exceeds anything we could ever understand. Stop limiting what you think God can or will do in your life. His grace is greater than your sin, and his forgiveness is more complete than the brokenness of your heart.

Closing Prayer

Dear Father, I am completely amazed at how you shatter my expectations with your radical grace. I confess that so many times I have approached you with a lack of faith. I came asking for the crumbs from the table when you had prepared a feast of celebration. Lord, forgive me for trying to put boundaries around your grace and mercy, for assuming that I knew the limits of your grace.

Thank you for embracing me as a son when I deserved shame. Thank you for giving me the robe and ring of sonship when I was humbled and broken by my sin. Please help me stop limiting what you can do in my life. Help me to understand the extravagance of your grace and teach me to receive with thankfulness all that you desire to give me, rather than settling for what I think I deserve in my life.

In the name of Jesus, I pray. Amen.

Before we move on to Chapter 11...

This would seem to bring us to the second break in the story... one which could be an ending itself. Remember, the Pharisees and others listening did not know what direction Jesus was going as he presented this illustration of salvation and rejoicing; they were surprised with every twist and turn that Jesus injected into the story.

As we move toward the end of the second major section of the parable, we find the father throwing a celebration that would put most of our parties to shame. There was BBQ, there was music and dancing...it was quite the community celebration! Interestingly, celebrations of this type were not normal in their culture. They did celebrate special events and would happily celebrate the return of a hero or honorable son. They would not, however, celebrate the return of a rebellious child, nor would they find the behavior of the father acceptable. This was completely unconventional and was no doubt confusing for the Pharisees who were listening to Christ's teaching. It is at this celebration, however, that our story finds us at the second natural ending. The son has returned home.

Though the father has resolved the shame in an unorthodox manner, honor has been restored through the gracious behavior of the father. The community has come together to celebrate the son's return. Everyone is thrilled with the son's return!

Everyone except the older brother.

Chapter 11

The Elder Son

Luke 15:25-30 Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard musick and dancing. And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant. And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound. And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and intreated him. And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf.

Near and yet far. There is a paradox in relationships that it is possible to be near a person in proximity and yet to be far from them emotionally. Sadly, we have all seen this within the marriage relationship; a couple can be living together as husband and wife and yet grow distant to the point that they might say, “I

don't even know my spouse." A child can spend 16-18 years of their life under their parents' roof and then walk away at age 18 as if the relationship was only a business transaction.

Jesus addresses this exact situation in Matthew 7:21-23. He declared that there will be many that will stand before Him in the day of judgment and will proclaim, "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works?" These are people who are involved in church, meeting the needs of the poor, and proclaiming their faith in Jesus. Even among that group of 'faithful followers', there will be those who are near to Jesus in action and yet have completely missed out on the reality of saving faith.

There is a reason why Jesus is using an example of a son who is near to the father and yet distant in relationship; the Pharisees had all the advantage of the law and the prophets, and yet missed out on having a real relationship with the Messiah.

Paul declares this in Romans 3 when he states, "What advantage then hath the Jew? or what profit is there of circumcision? Much every way: chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God." The Jewish people had in their custody a valuable possession that set them above all of the civilizations before and after; they had possession of God's Word! They were given the privilege of preserving and passing along the special revelation that God had given to His people in the Old Testament. More than any other people group, they were so close to the story of redemption that they missed out on making it personal. Paul goes on in Romans 9 to state that "I have great

heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart.” His heartache was generated by a genuine sadness over the general rejection of the Messiah. Instead of receiving Jesus as the Promised One, “He came unto his own, and his own received him not.”

This truth is what is being illustrated by the older son in our parable. While the younger son ran away in his rebellion, the older son stayed at home in his rebellion. He had all the access to the father, his grace, and mercy; instead of embracing the goodness of the father, he rejects it and lives in his own world that is full of bitterness. It is possible to be near the father and yet be so far away.

Two Sons - Two Responses

When confronted with the goodness of the Savior, there are two responses of sinful hearts. The first type of response is typified by the younger son. He was living in sin and overwhelmed by the consequences of his separation from his father. Recognizing his own helplessness, he came to himself and made the turn toward home. That son was weak and dependent on the father’s grace alone to restore him to fellowship. This is how some hearts respond; it is the heart cry of repentance from a soul that is trusting in Jesus alone to save!

The older son epitomizes the other type of response; some people are confronted with the gospel and yet refuse to submit to the goodness of the Savior. Instead of opening the heart to deal with the sin that is being exposed, they retreat to the safety of their own heart and pretend that things are well.

Unrighteousness? No way! “I’m a good person. I was baptized when I was a child...my dad was a deacon in the church...I’ve been a member of the church for years.” In essence, these are the words of the older son as he declared his own righteousness to the father and proudly pronounced he was to blame! That summarizes the two responses to the gospel: either humble submission or prideful rejection.

25 Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard musick and dancing. 26 And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant.

It had been a long day in the fields. The older son wasn’t a common laborer by any stretch of the imagination, but the heat and sun had done their damage; he was ready for the coolness of the house. The elder son is introduced to the Pharisees in a manner that would immediately elevate their first impression of him - he was a hard worker! While the younger son was out squandering the family’s wealth, the older son was doing what a noble son should be doing. He was supporting his father through faithful labor.

Hard work was an understatement in this first-century Palestinian culture. It was ingrained into the culture because it was a fundamental aspect of the Old Testament law. As God had given each Jewish family a portion of the land, He expected them to make the land produce the food needed for their family to survive. The pattern of work was seen in Creation itself; God worked for the six days of creation and then rested on the

seventh. Even those who had lost access to land were still given the opportunity to participate in the harvest through the gleaning laws. No one was given a free ride. Everyone had to work; hard work made sense to the Pharisees.

Over the centuries, this mentality of hard work seeped into the religious system as well. While it was the early Christian Judaizers who actively taught that salvation was by works (Galatians 2), the Pharisees had constructed a system where obedience to the law and following traditions were the actions of the righteous and blessed. Those that did not fit into their system had no path to gain “God’s favor” in their eyes; they placed heavier burdens on others to obey the ordinances of the Old Testament than they themselves were willing to observe.

The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’s seat: All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not. For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. Matthew 23:2-4

Older Brother’s Rejection

So, as the older son comes near to the house, he hears something that has been missing from his house for a long time: rejoicing! The music and dancing that hit his ears had been absent since his younger brother left with his inheritance. The illegitimate departure of his brother was devastating for his father and created intense community tension. As he crested the hill and made the turn toward home, he was confused. “What

does all this mean? Why is there rejoicing?” These are questions that he wanted answered! Getting the answers would be very simple; the older son just needed to go home, and it all would be clear.

Don't miss what is happening...it is at this point where Jesus begins drawing the parable to a conclusion; the older son refuses to go home. Though at first it seems like he is just asking about the celebration, it quickly becomes clear that he has no desire to be a part of any party for his brother's return. He stops short of the house and calls out a servant. The Greek word that Jesus used in this verse implies a servant of young age (παῖς pais). It was a young servant child who became the initial focus of his anger as he asked repeatedly about the celebration at the house. “Why is there a celebration? Why is there rejoicing?”

You can almost sense in his reaction to the music and celebration that he has already made up his mind to be angry, no matter what the celebration is about!

The young servant's answer was not what he wanted to hear. His younger brother had returned. This was a shock to his ears! “My brother is home? Is that the cause for celebration? Has my dad gone mad?” This was insane! His younger brother had absolutely destroyed his family and deserved nothing but shame and reproach! “I refuse to go home...I won't step one foot into that house with my scoundrel brother!”

Luke 15:28 And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and entreated him.

To a Pharisee, his anger was understandable, and his reaction was somewhat predictable. Like a father who can read the mind of his child, the father in our parable calmly comes out to talk to his older son. The Greek word that Jesus used for the Father's interceding (παρακαλέω, parakaleo) means "to be near and comfort." While the father could have been angry at the son's reaction, he responded with the same grace that was offered to the younger son. The father's desire was clear...he wanted both sons to dwell together under one roof! As we read verses 29 and 30, it is clear that the older son had incredible confusion about what was happening all around him.

Shortly, we will look at the older son's focus on his own good works; he was incredibly self-centered. First, however, we need to see the confusion that existed within the minds of the Jewish people.

A Fitting Ending

I remember hearing a story once of two older ladies sitting on the front porch, enjoying the cool summer breeze. As the sun began to set on the horizon, the temperature dropped, and the crickets began their chirping. Just then, the church next door started its evening choir practice. The melody rang out through the night and filled the air. One woman leaned over to the other and said, "My, they sure are singing beautifully tonight." (Of course, referring to the choir) The other woman responded, "I hear that they make their sounds by rubbing their legs together!" These two ladies were sitting on the same front porch, listening

to the same sounds...and yet they were hearing two very different things.

Two people can hear the same thing but have very different responses!

This conflict of understanding came up several times in Christ's ministry...and when it did, he addressed it head-on. Do you remember the story...when Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, "Whom do men say that I the Son of man am? And they said, Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets. He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am? And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." -Matthew 13:13-15

It was a simple question: "Who is Jesus?" It was a simple question with an answer that eluded many people. Now, before you ridicule the unbelieving Jews of the day, remember that we have so much more of God's Revelation than they had in their time. We have the written record of the apostles, the history of the early church from the book of Acts, as well as John's Revelation of things to come. We have the full context, while theirs was limited; yet there were still many who believed that Jesus was the Messiah! What we find is that the expectation of the people actually became a stumbling block to their acknowledging that Jesus was the Christ. Many were looking for a Messiah who would fulfill the prophecy of Malachi 3:1 and come busting onto the scene. Some were hoping for a military leader who would lead an uprising against the oppressive Roman rule. Even the disciples were confused about Jesus's primary role as

Messiah; we see them asking about the earthly kingdom right up to the point that Jesus ascended into heaven in Acts 1.

Not only was the older son confused by the loud and joyful celebration, but he was also confused by the grace that the father was extending to his undeserving brother. It made no sense. The forgiveness made no sense. The mercy made no sense. His younger brother deserved nothing! Yet the father is giving him everything. It especially made no sense because he had been so faithful all those years and had never received any type of celebration!

*29 And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends:
30 But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf.*

This is the ultimate demonstration of pride, anger, and disrespect. Now we see the tables turn. At one point in this story, the younger son was full of rebellion and pride; now we get to see the true colors of the older brother as well. As you read through these verses, it becomes very clear that the elder brother wasn't angry at his younger brother...he was angry at the father! He was angered over the radical grace he had shown to his 'undeserving' brother. He was angry that so many resources were being spent on the celebration. He was angry that the father's best was being poured out on the repentant son!

Four Pictures

There are four powerful word pictures that we see in this interaction with the father to help us understand the mindset of the Pharisees of the day. First, the older son showed incredible disrespect to the father. Though the English word ‘lo’ seems rather innocent, it carries a very heavy load grammatically. It comes from the word translated “behold.” In essence, he was saying, “Look, Dad!” Look at what I am getting ready to tell you. Look. I am sick and tired of being pushed aside for all I have done for you.

Then we see the second indication of his rebellion. He compares his service to the father to slavery. “Lo, these many years do I serve thee.” The word ‘serve’ comes from the Greek *doulos*, which means “slave or slavery.” He was comparing his work for the father to slavery. “Dad, I slaved away for you all these years, and you never did anything for me!” As a side note, if the time working for the father was so difficult, why didn’t he just leave? He could have easily packed up his bags and hit the road, headed for a new town and fresh horizons. He didn’t leave because he had too much to gain - he stood to inherit all that was left of the father’s belongings.

That allows us to see the third clue to his rebellion; he was full of greed. He comes home to a celebration for his brother, and now he has to sit here and watch his dad squander away what he considered his inheritance; it was being wasted! In essence, he had the exact same attitude that the younger son had at the very beginning of our story. “Dad, I don’t care about you or your love...I only want what’s coming to me!”

The fourth sign of the son's rebellion is seen through this statement, "Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment." Why did the older son think he was more worthy than his younger brother? Because he had obeyed all the rules! He had followed all of his dad's laws and had carried out his orders; he performed the duties of a son; he had stuck it out and toed the line for dear old pop. In his mind, that was what it took to earn the favor of the father. Yet, there was no connecting his service to the father to a relationship with him.

The Older Brother = The Pharisees

As this portion of our story comes to a close, we see a tragic and yet honest picture of the Pharisees of Jesus's day. They believed that God was only concerned about the external compliance with the law. They devised hundreds of trivial rules that pushed outward the limits of what God had given through Moses. They lifted them up as equal with God's Revelation and scorned those who did not meet up to their standard of righteousness. These rules, as well-intentioned as they were, actually concealed the true purpose of God's law, which was to point toward the coming Redeemer. Near and yet so far away. It is possible to be near the father and yet never have a relationship with him.

Heart Check - The Danger of Spiritual Proximity

As we come to this portion of the story, we are confronted by a question that may make you uncomfortable: Is it possible that you have been living like the older brother in this story? Maybe

you've been in church for years; you know all the stories, you can sing all the hymns, you've served on important committees...you follow all the rules. On the outside, people see you as a faithful Christian, someone who has "stayed home" with the Father while others have wandered off into the wilderness of sin. But deep in your heart, there may be a coldness toward God that is hiding behind all of your religious activity. You may be near to the Father's house but far from his heart.

The tragedy of the older brother wasn't his faithfulness; it was his heartlessness. The older brother lived his entire life in his father's house, but he never truly had a relationship with his father's heart. This is the danger that faces those who grow up in and around Christianity or other religious environments. We can become so familiar with the trappings of religion and forms of faith that we miss the closeness of a relationship with Jesus Christ.

And here's what is so heartbreaking about this situation: you can sit in church every Sunday morning, put money in the offering plate, or even teach others in Sunday school or children's church, and at your core, you are unchanged by the grace of the Father. You can have access to God's word yet have a heart that is hard toward him.

The beautiful truth of this story, however, is that the father came out to the older son also. He begged him to come inside and to join in the celebration. If you find yourself more concerned with the fairness of religion and focused on what you deserve and what you think other people deserve, God is calling you as well. God invites you to discover the heart of the Father

that you've been serving all along, but missing the sweet fellowship that comes with connecting with his heart.

Closing Prayer

Father, I confess that too often I have lived my life like the older brother: near to your house but far from your heart. I have mistaken the activity that I offer to you through my church attendance and giving as an authentic relationship. Please forgive me for the times that I served you out of spite, thinking that I deserved something in return. Lord, search my heart. Reveal to me the bitterness that has crept in and keeps me from enjoying your presence. Help me be thankful for the grace you show toward others and toward me.

Jesus, I don't want to be standing outside the house watching others celebrate. I want to come inside and experience the fullness of joy that you offer to me as your child. Lord, draw me close to you. Help me to celebrate your grace and marvel at your mercy rather than judging those that I think are undeserving.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

Chapter 12

Mercy Extended

Luke 15:31-32 And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.

There are few things more distasteful than an ungrateful child. Imagine that we are strolling through the deli section of the local food mart. Our shopping trip is going well; we have found a few unexpected sales, and we are well on our way to hitting the checkout line. Then, out of the blue, our shopping trip is interrupted by a sound that every shopper recognizes; it is the sound of a spoiled, ungrateful child! Give me this...I want that!

Please understand, we are not talking about a fussy child. My wife and I have four children who all went with us to the store, sat in the cart, and had their fair share of meltdowns because it was naptime. Our kids also had times where their sinful nature was on open display, and they weren't ashamed to show it! The

behavior that we are talking about is different; we bristle at the sound of a child who is unthankful for what has been provided and expects to get whatever he or she wants.

It is far more repulsive to see a grown son act in the same way.

As we come to the end of the parable, we are confronted with something that goes against human nature; we naturally resist those who are full of pride and arrogance. The older son had just gotten something off his chest that he had been carrying for far too long; though it seemed harsh, he was convinced that his dad needed to hear everything he had said.

- Talk down to dad to show that he was nobody's child - check.
- Point out how he had slaved away in the father's fields for years - check.
- Sharply point out that Dad was wasting all the valuable resources that were rightfully his inheritance - check.

Radical Grace - Again

It goes against human understanding that the father offered grace and mercy to his older son. His ungracious attitude is sickening; he deserved to be put in his place.

There are two times that radical grace is offered in this parable. First, the father offers undeserved favor to the younger son when he greets him with open arms. This is the most visible example of grace and is the one to which we are naturally drawn. The younger son accepts the good grace of the father and is restored to his position of sonship! We love this expression of grace! However, there is another demonstration of radical grace

that is much less considered and not nearly as esteemed as the other; it is the father's grace that is fully extended to the older son. He was just as undeserving as his younger brother, though he was completely unaware of how withdrawn he was from his father.

“Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine.” The father extends all the rights of sonship to the older brother; the son only has to follow the father back home. It seems so simple. The same offer of grace and mercy that brought the younger son back into fellowship with the father is freely offered to the rebellious older son as well! In the context of the passage, these are not empty words. The words of the father parallel the grace that God had extended to the followers of Jehovah for centuries. They had the same offer to come into fellowship with God, but it demanded that they be willing to come into the house...and come in God's way!

Sadly, in the same way that the older son's response is missing from the end of the story, there is a missing response from the staunch keepers of the law as well. John 1:10-11 states, “He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not.” For almost 1,500 years, the Jewish people had full access to the prophecies of the Old Testament, and God, through inspiration, revealed Himself and illuminated the pathway to Jesus Christ, the coming Messiah. Yet with the pathway to redemption revealed and prophecies being fulfilled before their own eyes, the majority of the Jewish religious

leaders were blind to the presence of the Messiah. It is a thrill to report that there were some who did trust in Christ!

How do we know that grace was equally offered to the Pharisees? Because there were at least three Pharisees who we know accepted that grace and were restored to sonship! Consider briefly these men from the Scriptures.

First, we see a man named Nicodemus from John 3. He was a high-ranking ruler within the Jewish community and was seeking Truth from the one who came to give Truth. He approached Jesus one evening under the cover of darkness. The pressures from the other Jewish unbelievers were so intense that his only opportunity to speak to The Master was in the dimness of the night. Not only did Nicodemus come to Jesus, but he also came asking all the right questions! He spoke of Christ's deity. He affirmed His identity. There were questions about being born again and being born of the Spirit. Nicodemus reveals to us that his heart was searching; he had come to the right place to find the answers!

Jesus's response to Nicodemus was kind and compassionate. He walked Nicodemus through the gospel in the same way that he cared for the spiritual needs of His disciples. There was no harshness in Christ's voice - only an extension of grace and mercy to one who had once opposed Him. Nicodemus's response? Well, the Scriptures remain fairly quiet about Nicodemus and his response. In fact, it seems as though he walks away confused, having rejected the offer of salvation that was extended. John 3, however, isn't the end of the story for Nicodemus!

As we move through the book of John, we come to our Savior hanging on the cross in chapter nineteen. His lifeless body remained hanging on the cross; onlookers were unsure if they were allowed to bring His body down. John 19:39-40 states, “And there came also Nicodemus, who at the first came to Jesus by night, and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred pound weight. Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury.”

Now Nicodemus wasn't alone; we will discuss the other man shortly. However, in that moment, Nicodemus did something that Peter, James, Matthew, Simon, and Thomas didn't do; he took care of the lifeless body of the Savior. While John doesn't reference Nicodemus directly as a disciple, his actions at the cross speak to his changed heart toward The Master who had offered him eternal life.

Nicodemus wasn't the only one to help take Jesus off the cross. Joseph of Arimathaea was also present and helped remove Jesus that day. While the Scriptures contain less information about this man than even Nicodemus, what we are told is very insightful and reveals his spiritual condition. First, we are told that he was part of the Sanhedrin - the group of men who called for the crucifixion. Luke's gospel account reveals that Joseph stood in opposition to that decision (Luke 23:51). Why? Because secretly he was a follower of the Messiah!

Mark describes him as a man who was waiting for the kingdom of God. John refers to him as a secret disciple of Jesus; he was fearful of what the Pharisees would do to him if he

confessed to Jesus. Though he didn't openly follow Jesus as he walked the shores of Galilee or sit under his teaching as he told his disciples of things to come, Joseph was one of the Pharisees who heard the gracious call of the Savior and responded!

The third Pharisee conversion that we learn about in Scripture is someone who is slightly more well-known - the Apostle Paul! While we know Paul as a great statesman for the faith through reading Acts, and we learn from his letters to the early churches, Paul started his journey as a devout Jewish boy who learned the law under the best teachers. Paul's self-description in Philippians 3 is eye-opening; he was the older son in our story in every way!

Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. Philippians 3:5-6

His religious pride drove him to oppose the father's mercy in ways that are difficult to imagine. Paul (then Saul) was the Great Persecutor of the early church; he prided himself on detecting believers and rooting them out to be imprisoned. Scripture records that he "breathed out threatenings and slaughter" against those who followed the teachings of Jesus. In fact, Paul (of his own bidding) sought permission to go to Damascus to uncover a group of believers and send them to prison. Paul actively opposed the mercy and grace of Jesus; all of this while considering himself a keeper of the law.

Just like the older son, Paul was close to the father and yet so far away from him.

This all changed with a flash of light. It was on the road to Damascus that God graciously extended His mercy to Paul; this parallels the father coming out to speak to his older son in our parable. Confronted by the very one that had been the focus of his persecution, Paul humbled himself before the Lord! In a response not seen by the older son in our parable, Paul did not refuse the offer of grace from the Father but rather embraced Him and chose to be a part of the celebration. Paul was no longer “far away”; through salvation, he was brought back into fellowship with the Father!

...And then there were crickets.

What was the older son’s response? Did he choose to join in the celebration? This parable has such an abrupt ending that it leaves the reader hanging. There is no clear resolution to the situation that we have been presented; the father and older son are standing in the field, looking at the house, standing in silence. Suspense is an incredible literary tool that good writers weave into their stories to keep the reader holding on till the very end. However, a good suspense writer knows how to finish the story!

There is nothing more satisfying than coming to the end of a gripping mystery novel and seeing the pieces of the story fit together as you come to the final page. We are at that point in our story! Except, instead of using the tool of suspense and

resolution, Jesus uses suspense and uncertainty. He doesn't resolve the tension at the end of the parable. It just ends.

Do you see that? Jesus doesn't finish the story.

This is an incredible tactic that Jesus used quite effectively in this story. Its effectiveness is built on the fact that the story has a defined structure that is predictable when you step back and consider how the story progresses. Let's reflect first on the younger son's half of the story and its progression. ...and don't get lost in the specifics of the structure, but see the symmetrical nature of the story.

A - the son is dead to the father

B - the son loses all of the inheritance

C - the son is alone and cast aside

D - the son is hungry and in desperate need

D - the son recognizes that his father has plenty

C - the son is embraced by the father

B - the son is restored to his position of son

A - the son was dead and is now alive

There is hidden beauty in the parallelism of the Parable of the Prodigal Son that we don't even see when we read through it so quickly; it is only seen when we step back and look at the beauty of the poetic structure. Jesus spoke in a way that took the listener on a journey of emotions that began with the cultural

death of the son and ended at the joyous reunion with the father. Jesus presents the story this way for two reasons.

First, it is an effective manner of building emotion within a narrative. Tragedy, loss, need, realization, turning, cry for help, restoration, rejoicing: You could write almost any story using this pattern and be able to connect the reader to the characters and, as a result, communicate intense emotion. The second reason that Jesus used this pattern is simple. He was setting the listeners up for an unresolved ending. That's right; Jesus built the story intentionally so the ending was more dramatic! As we come to the final plea from the father, the parable ends so abruptly that you can almost miss the fact that you have moved on. However, the lack of resolution created a tension within the story that left the Pharisees stunned and speechless. Consider the progression of the second half of Christ's parable, and you will see the unresolved ending was not an accident.⁶

- A - older son stands away in the field
- B - older son is angry over his brother
- C - the father's gracious approach
- D - older son focuses on his right actions
- D - older son focuses on his brother's actions
- C - the father's gracious appeal
- B - the father's joy over the return of the younger son
- A - NOTHING!

⁶ Kenneth Bailey, *Finding the Lost Cultural Keys to Luke 15* (St. Louis, Concordia Press, 1992), 148.

The Intentional Abrupt Ending

That's it. The parable ends without ever knowing what action the older brother in the story took. Did he join the celebration? Was there a family reunion with the entire family? Those are questions that Jesus left unanswered on purpose. You see, the ball was now in the Pharisees' court. Their response to the gospel was dependent on their response to the gracious call to join the celebration. We know that there were some who did respond; we looked at their testimonies earlier in this chapter. However, the vast majority of the Pharisees remained in their unbelief, blinded by their own religious tradition. It is possible to be close to the father and yet to be far from him in your heart.

Though the parable ends rather abruptly in Luke 15, I am here to tell you that the ending of the parable is actually contained in Scripture! That's right – there is a hidden ending that is so often overlooked that you might be surprised to hear that it even exists....and it is not speculation or guesswork.

Let's go!

To fully understand how the parable ended, consider that the parable (as it was given in Luke 15) only had two possible endings. It would either end with the older brother reconciling with the father and joining in the celebration, or it would end with him remaining outside and distant from the father's grace. Here is how those two may have played out if the ending were written for us in Luke 15.

Luke 15:31-32 31 “And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. 32 It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found...”

..and then possible option #1

..Then the elder son, seeing the love of his father and being moved by his tender mercies, fell on his knees and said, “Father, I repent for my bitter spirit, for my heart of anger toward your kindness. I, too, am not worthy to be called your son. Father, please forgive me for my rebellious spirit.” Then the father, moved with compassion, fell on the older son’s neck and cried great tears of joy, and took the older son by the hand, and they joined together in the celebration of the father’s mercy and grace. Thus, they celebrated that both sons were lost, but now had been found. Both were dead, and yet now were made alive again!

...and then possible option #2

..Then the elder son, being full of anger over his father’s love for the younger son, became bitter and hardened to the love of the father. From that day forward, he refused to rejoice over his younger brother’s return – the lingering anger was more than his heart could control. Prompted by the prolonged resentment, the older son was moved to action. Luring the gracious father into the garden, the older son lashed out in fury and struck his father so that he died.

As harsh as Option #2 seems...that is exactly what happened!
That is how the story actually ends!

All through Christ's earthly ministry, He preached grace and mercy to all who would respond. This is evidenced by the number of people who came to faith under his preaching. The call to repent was given, and the listeners were presented with the choice to believe and receive or reject the gospel message. Coincidentally, many of the Jewish leaders followed in the exact path that the older son had set himself toward. There was a pride in their heart and a refusal to accept the gracious call of the Savior. This pride kept them outside the father's house; they refused to come in to the celebration of the father's grace and mercy.

This refusal of the Savior was more than just a surface rejection – they desired to see him killed. Often in the New Testament, we hear of the Pharisees' anger over the words of Jesus. This anger was deep. The hatred that they had for Jesus drove them to plot his death and eventually deliver Him up to the Romans to be tried and punished. Even after the Roman authorities cleared Him of all charges, the persistent cries to crucify Jesus demonstrated that it wasn't about guilt or innocence – it was about rejection.

They rejected Him as the Messiah. They rejected his offer of grace and mercy. They refused to come into the 'house' and be brought back into fellowship with their Messiah. They led Jesus outside of the city, and after mocking and reviling our Saviour, they crucified Him on a cross made of rough wooden timbers. Their hatred for Jesus Christ and rejection of his free offer of

salvation culminated in His death. This is the true ending of the parable. The elder son rejected the father's offer of radical grace...and instead slew him in anger.

Modern Day Pharisees

In the same way that the Pharisees in Christ's day struggled with their righteousness coming from something other than rules and traditions, we can walk along the same path in our attempt to live righteously before God. In fact, it is easy to slip into the same trappings of rules and traditions they struggled with; we can depend on our position in relation to others to become the indicator of our spirituality. I know this isn't a comfortable conversation...but we can't be confronted with the self-righteousness of the older son and not self-reflect on our own lives. Here are eight indicators that the spirit of the older brother may have crept into your spiritual walk.

Church activity equals spirituality.

The older son was very proud of all the years that he had 'slaved' away for the father. It was his service to the father that made him more deserving and praiseworthy. When our actions become the basis for our worth to God, we have become just like the Pharisees.

Rules become the focus.

Pharisees love to argue. There is always something that they are against, someone that they are opposing, or some new behavior that must be avoided. In fact, Pharisees have a hard time

separating all the things they are against from the gospel message. To a great extent, the Pharisees of Jesus's day were more concerned with obeying their set of rules than following in the footsteps of the Savior.

You think God needs you.

Do you remember the words of the older son? He was confident that his service to the father was deserving of praise and recognition. He was angered that his efforts were unappreciated.

Bible study is to prove you are right...not to know God better.

No one knew the Scriptures better than the Scribes and Pharisees of Jesus's day. However, they failed to use their knowledge in a way that actually drew them to an understanding of the Messiah. Instead, their grasp of the Old Testament accomplished little more than substantiating their work-based religion.

You must conform to a standard.

Because the Christian life is about a set of rules, conformity to those rules becomes the yardstick by which your spirituality is judged. In fact, some will go so far as to deny the radical grace of the Father (through preaching, church attendance, fellowship) unless there is conformity to the established standards.

Pharisees are easily angered when confronted.

The father extended a gracious plea to the older son, and his response was full of anger and bitterness. Pharisees can't afford

to be confronted over their distance from the father. When this happens, they go into full attack mode.

Personal sin isn't that bad.

The younger son deserved to be disowned; he was a disgrace to the family. The older son, however, didn't need to repent of his anger or bitterness. The sins of the Pharisees are never that bad compared to the sins of others.

You are angered when God offers grace to the unlovely.

When sinners are brought to repentance, is your heart filled with joy? When the enemies of God are granted grace and mercy, a hesitant joy indicates the presence of a Pharisee's spirit. God has the right to grant grace and mercy to whomever He wills! We should rejoice when our enemies are spared and are able to taste the goodness of the Lord!

When the older son was confronted by his distance from the father, he responded with excuses, anger, and finger-pointing. His actions become a pattern by which we can (and should) judge our own standing with the Father. The reality is that the Pharisees were content to remain distant from Jesus and continue their existence in the "fields" of religion and tradition. Just as the father extended grace to the older son, the gracious sacrifice of Jesus Christ is sufficient to save even the worst sinner!

Heart Check - The End of Your Story

As we come to the end of the parable, the most haunting and bothersome part of the story isn't the prodigal son's desperate return home—it's the unfinished story of the older brother. Jesus deliberately left us hanging in this parable. We never learn whether the older brother swallowed his selfish pride and entered the house or if he remained outside, cold and indifferent to his father's grace. This forces us to confront a question about our own hearts: What will the end of our story look like?

The older brother served in the father's fields but never celebrated at the father's table. He knew all the rules and obeyed them, but he never experienced the radical grace and love of his father. His religious pride kept him...

The Pharisees who heard this parable lived out the older brother's story to its logical conclusion. Their rejection of Jesus's grace and mercy was so complete that they designed and orchestrated his death on the cross. They chose to murder their savior rather than to accept his extended grace.

Friend, your story isn't finished yet. However, you are writing the end of it with every choice that you make. Will you be like the prodigal son who returned home to the father and ran to the father's grace? Will you be like Nicodemus or Paul, religious people who swallowed their pride and embraced the grace of Jesus Christ? Or will you remain outside of the father's house, convinced of your own self-righteousness and missing out on the celebration of God's grace?

Don't let your story end like the older brother's. Let your legacy be one of a sinner saved by the radical grace of the father.

Closing Prayer

Dear Lord, as we close this journey through the Parable of the Prodigal Son, our hearts are moved by the radical grace that you so willingly give to those who come running home to the loving Father. Lord, help us not just change our behavior but to be transformed by your overwhelming grace and love.

Whether we are returning from the far country like the younger son, or stepping out of the fields of self-righteousness like the older... thank you for meeting us with open arms.

May our lives be marked not by what we think we have accomplished for you, but by the overwhelming grace and mercy that you have extended toward us.

In Jesus' precious name, Amen.

THE END

Epilogue



Common Misconceptions

I will be honest with you...this is not a chapter that I planned on writing when I set out to compose this book. My desire was to bring the parable to an end and then to allow the truths from the passage to settle in and do their work.

Sometimes the words “The End” are very elusive. Often our best laid plans take detours that we did not intend; from time to time, we are forced to accept that there is more work to be done, and the job is not complete. Over the several months of this writing, I have had several insightful discussions with friends in the ministry that have revealed that this book needs this final chapter. Though we have come to several conclusions from the words of Jesus in Luke 15, not everyone comes to those same conclusions. To be frank, not everyone is ‘free’ to allow the text to speak so plainly about man’s sin, repentance, forgiveness, and restoration. For some, doing so would go against the very foundations of their soteriology.

It was through conversations with friends and acquaintances that I became aware of such a pushback against what I feel is the obvious and intended interpretation of this chapter. I was

introduced to several arguments as to why people think this interpretation is invalid; it became obvious that these objections, though they are easily dismissed, can create significant doubt if not thought through carefully. In fact, it was with you (the reader) in mind that I decided to write this chapter and address a few of the more ‘convincing’ objections. My desire is that you will be able to take the illustration of radical grace that Jesus Christ lays out for us in Luke 15 and use it to accurately communicate the gospel. Inevitably, doing so would invite the skepticism of critics and force you to defend your point of interpretation.

Now that you have studied the passage in depth and seen Christ’s clear and obvious purpose, I am confident that you could articulate many of these on your own. However, in the next few pages, I would like to present to you many of the common arguments against our interpretation in the hopes that they would strengthen your understanding of Christ’s wonderful words of salvation in the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

Objection #1 - The Parable of the Prodigal Son isn’t about salvation.

This is covered first for two reasons. First, it goes to the very heart of our interpretation. If the context of Luke 15 isn’t salvation, then we have to throw out everything that pertains to salvation that we have covered in all of the previous chapters. Think of how much of this book would be considered “in error” if the context of this passage had nothing to do with salvation. The second reason why we cover this objection first is that it is

likely the first objection that you will hear when talking to those who take exception to this interpretation. It is simply the “low-hanging fruit” that most often gets thrown first.

Let’s look at it from their perspective first. If the parable isn’t about salvation, then what is it about? The answers may vary slightly, but they inevitably come to this conclusion: the parable is about (1) God’s grace poured out on those (believers) who backslide and rebel against him or (2) the shameful behavior of the Pharisees in not rejoicing over that grace. This position makes a very subtle and yet fundamental assumption that the younger son represents a backslidden believer. While we freely acknowledge that the Pharisees’ response to Jesus’s gracious interactions with the undeserving is at the center of the overall purpose of the chapter, you have to establish the identity of the recipients of that grace. Whoever was receiving the grace in Luke 15:1-2 is at the same time identified as the lost coin, the lost sheep, and the lost/dead son. In other words, were the Pharisees upset that Jesus fellowshiped with backslidden Christians or with sinners? That simple question lies at the heart of this objection.

While it is Luke who records his gospel account, it is the words of Jesus Christ Himself that declare the identity of those recipients. They were sinners! The Pharisees were upset that Jesus was eating and offering undeserved favor to sinners. Were they just ‘backslidden Christians’ that were overwhelmed with their sin? Absolutely not. That is why twice in this chapter, Jesus declares that there is rejoicing in heaven over one sinner that

comes to repentance. The joy is over the finding of the lost coin, the lost sheep, the lost son...a lost soul!

Why is this important? If we concede that the parable is about God's grace on rebellious believers, we must somehow undo the cultural implications of the younger son's rebellion. There could be no real guilt for the younger son's actions, for "there is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus." (Romans 8:1) The younger son's wasting of his inheritance must be viewed as a believer's squandering all that we have as heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ. (Romans 8:17) There would have been no need for the younger son's 'come to himself' moment; he could have walked confidently back home and expected all the rights of sonship because he was still a son!

If for no other reason, there is a consistency in interpretation that demands that the Parable of the Prodigal Son center around the salvation of the lost. When we consider the interpretation of a passage, it is imperative to take the cultural, Scriptural, and circumstantial context into mind. None of these have changed within Luke 15. The words in the first ten verses are spoken to the same people under the same circumstances with an identical purpose as the last twenty-two verses. To insert an arbitrary division within the chapter that changes the interpretation is dangerous as a student of the Scriptures and can easily result in interpretations that are not true to the text. If it is clear through Christ's own words that the first two parables focus on the rejoicing in heaven over sinners that come to repentance, then we should take great care not to alter that clear directive as we interpret the final of the three parables.

One last thought. Never in Scripture are believers ever referred to as 'lost' or 'dead.' Those are terms reserved for those who have never come to faith and are still "dead in their trespasses and sins." It would be totally inconsistent within the passage for the younger son to represent a rebellious believer, and yet the lost coin and lost sheep clearly represent a lost soul that comes to repentance. Those are Christ's very words!

Identifying the younger son as a rebellious believer makes no sense within the passage and forces the interpretation well beyond the normal and plain meaning of the parable as Jesus gave it to the listeners.

Objection #2 - The younger son was always a son.

If the first objection demonstrates a lack of discernment surrounding the context of the passage, this one reveals a lack of consideration of the cultural context. This objection is often framed through this type of argument: "At the beginning of the story, the younger son was a son. In the middle, he was a son. At the end, he was still a son. Though he walked away from his father, he was still a son. It would be wrong to consider him 'lost' or a 'sinner' while feeding the swine within the parable; unless you believe that a person can be saved (a son) and then lose his salvation, you must always consider the younger son as part of God's family."

There are two points where this objection falls apart; the first is on the grounds of cultural context. To say that the son in the parable was always a son is culturally incorrect. I realize that in Western cultures, there is a connection that children have to

their parents, no matter what they do to shame the family. I have heard personal accounts from local maximum security prison guards as they tell of the overwhelming number of parents and family members that come out for “family day” at the prison. Sons who have committed wicked and shameful things are embraced and celebrated by parents and spouses. Though they are guilty of the worst that society can imagine, the prison is inundated with family members who want to see their loved one, their son.

Jesus Christ was not speaking to our Westernized culture. Behavior that brings shame to the family is dealt with harshly; a rebellious son is not embraced as a son but is shunned and disowned by the family and community. This honor/shame dynamic still exists today in many parts of the world and is the driving force within many cultures. In fact, the phrase “you are dead to me” has two very real connections within the parable. Think back to the demand that the younger son made to his father. “Dad, though you aren’t dead yet, you are dead to me...I want my inheritance, and I am leaving!”

The son’s unimaginable demand communicated clearly to his father that he wanted out of the family! On the other side, do you remember the words that Jesus gave to the father as he embraced his wayward son back home? “For this, my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.” The father clearly verbalizes the son’s deadness to the family...he had been disowned by the culture. To view the family dynamic in this passage only through Western eyes completely misses the reality

that Jesus was speaking to people who lived in a completely different culture.

The second way in which this objection loses ground is often seen in the follow-up response to what we just established. “Are you saying that a person can be a son (saved) and then choose to walk away and lose his salvation, only to return and be welcomed back into God’s family?” The answer is a simple “No.” To make this claim or bring up this objection fails to recognize that we don’t have to rebel to be put out of God’s family; we are all born that way! Romans 5:12 states clearly that “...as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.” Adam was the only man born into fellowship with God.

In the same way that the younger son squandered the inheritance of the father, Adam turned his back on the Father and squandered away all the blessings and goodness that God had given to mankind in the perfect world. In seeking to be like a god (Genesis 3:5), Adam turned his back on the Heavenly Father; Adam was forced out of the garden. He was spiritually disowned and cast aside. He was no longer a ‘child of God’ by nature. It is in this state of spiritual separation that we are all born.

I didn’t have to rebel against my heavenly Father; I was born in rebellion. You were, too! In a spiritual sense, you were born separated from the Father, feeding the swine, with no hope of saving yourself. You see, no one has to lose their salvation in order to become the ‘prodigal son.’ We are wayward and apart from God from our very entrance into the world! So while the younger son in the parable was still the progeny of the father, in

reality, he was dead to the father and no longer part of the family. With that in mind, the younger son's position and relationship with the father illustrate a lost soul perfectly...just as Jesus intended!

Objection #3 - God is the father, not Jesus.

While this is not the most obvious objection, it is one that I have heard nonetheless. If you can argue against the identity of the younger son, you can also argue against the identity of the father in the parable. Who is the father? Well, the easiest conclusion would be that the father represents God the Father. Why? Because they both have the name 'father.' It seems simple enough! Sadly, that is as deep as some would like to go in their pursuit of Christ's teaching in this chapter. Thankfully, we have laid enough of a foundation that the identity of the father should be relatively easy to uncover.

The entire chapter was written to demonstrate the attitude of the Pharisees toward Jesus's gracious encounter with sinners in their community. So there were three groups that needed to be addressed in the parable.

First were the sinners – the youngest son. Then there were the Pharisees – the older son. That leaves only Jesus! It is completely fitting soteriologically that Jesus is at the center of this story of redemption...He is the epicenter of the entire story of redemption! Jesus Christ was at the center of creation. Jesus Christ was the focus of prophecy. Jesus was central to the plan of redemption. Jesus's life is the hinge on which history turns.

Jesus's earthly experience was the central focus of God's love toward mankind.

Objection #4 - There is no mention of Christ's sacrifice in the parable.

Usually this objection is framed in this manner – “The father can't represent Jesus Christ and His offer of salvation since there is no mention of Christ's atoning sacrifice in the parable.” This is an objection that is impossible to disprove. In fact, it is completely accurate to say that there is no mention of Christ's atoning sacrifice within the parable. However, does the absence of that detail necessarily mean that you must recontextualize the entire chapter? No! In fact, this objection is nothing more than two separate logical fallacies crammed into one objection.

First, this argument commits the logical fallacy called “moving the goalposts.” This occurs when the standard for the discussion is moved higher and higher within the conversation... often moving it beyond what is possible to establish. No one would ever start with this objection, but often this becomes a second or third attempt to derail a salvific interpretation of the parable. In essence, it is setting up the absence of evidence within the parable as evidence for their position. This leads us to the second logical fallacy called “argument from silence.” This fallacy of logic assumes that if the one argument they are making (Christ's sacrifice) is missing from the parable, then it is established that the parable cannot be about salvation. Do you see how the goalposts have been raised? Instead of allowing the

words that Jesus gave to speak for themselves, the standard is being raised above the text.

While this objection is a simple logical fallacy, the consequences of this argument are serious – the focus of the attack is Jesus Christ Himself. It assumes that we know better than Jesus what elements need to be included in order to make the parable effective. As Jesus spoke these words, He gave everything that was necessary and needed to make His point clear and complete to the listeners. He included everything that needed to be included and left out everything that needed to be left out. To argue otherwise is to accuse Jesus of being incomplete in the details of the parable.

Objection #5 - It is wrong to teach doctrine from a parable.

Well, sort of. While this objection seems to be an attempt to protect the Scriptures – to keep them from being twisted and contorted – it actually makes an assumption that is false. It is false to say that a parable cannot teach doctrine. If a parable was given within the context of doctrine, then it would be completely appropriate to let that parable speak to which it was given. Parables about the kingdom teach us truth (doctrine) about the gospel, how it is received, and how it is spread. Parables about eschatology teach us truth (doctrine) about Christ's coming, the end times, and the eternal fate of the lost. In that sense, parables that were given in the context of a lost soul coming to repentance (Jesus's own words in Luke 15) can and should be interpreted completely within the context of that truth (doctrine).

There is a form of this objection that is completely valid, though it does not really apply in our situation. It would state that it is wrong to “form” or “base” a doctrine on a parable. That would be completely accurate! Yes! It would be completely inappropriate and theologically foolish to use parables as the foundation for our doctrine. Parables were never meant to establish doctrine but were cast alongside a theological truth in order to make that truth more understandable. It would be very dangerous to take a parable, no matter how complex and intricate, and form your doctrine around that genre of teaching. Parables simply do not teach doctrine.

To be clear, we have not used the Parable of the Prodigal Son that way in this book. While we have looked at the doctrine of salvation and clearly tried to understand all the contextual clues that Jesus Christ used, the Parable of the Prodigal Son is thrown alongside passages like John 3 and Romans 1-8. Those are the texts that establish our understanding of salvation. Luke 15 just helps illustrate the doctrine that Scripture clearly establishes elsewhere.

Objection #6 - When interpreting a parable, there is one and only one point.

This final objection is based on the desire to protect the extent to which a parable is interpreted. In other words, let’s not take parables too far...let’s not make parables say things they weren’t intended to say. This argument stems from a true understanding of parables – they were given to teach or reveal a specific truth rather than teach broad truths. What we have to establish with

this parable is the extent to which that one truth is revealed within the text. In other words, we must establish how far you can take the Parable of the Prodigal Son and still be within the bounds of proper interpretation.

The ‘one truth’ of this parable is simple – the Pharisees refused to rejoice over the offer of grace to undeserving sinners. In its simplicity, however, we just introduced the doctrine of salvation! To put it another way, it is impossible to remove the illustration of salvation from the parable because it is within this illustration that the hard-hearted Pharisees are revealed.

When this objection is raised, it is usually on the basis of excluding salvation from the picture altogether. The context simply won’t allow us to do that! If we remove any mention of the radical grace of the father or refuse to recognize that the younger son illustrates mankind that is lost and dead in sin, then what are the Pharisees upset about? Seriously! We have removed the very thing that Jesus intended to illustrate in the first place! While we would agree that it is dangerous to take a parable’s interpretation too far, it is clear that the salvation of the lost is right in line with the proper explanation of this parable.

Recommended Resources

Throughout the writing of this book, I have referenced many printed works that have helped me along the way. Though not all of them have been cited directly within this book, they were all helpful in gaining a better understanding of the culture and context in which Christ's Parable of the Prodigal Son was given. This brief list includes the books that were extremely helpful in my study.

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