

LESSONS FROM THE PRODIGAL SON

Luke 15:11-32

The famed American novelist, **CHARLES DICKENS**, was asked what he thought was the best short story in the English language. **DICKENS** replied, “THE PRODIGAL SON.” Indeed, THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON is the best-known and most-beloved parable of Jesus. But it is not actually about the prodigal son. It is about the loving father. The prodigal son consumes much attention in this story. He is the character we most identify with. But the fundamental message of this parable is rooted in the love of the father for his two sons.

Luke 15:1-2 sets the scene: “Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.” Jesus responded by telling three parables. Verses 4-7 is the parable of the lost sheep. Verses 8-10 is the parable of the lost silver. Verses 11-32 is the parable of the lost son. These three parables make one point: Lost people matter to God. This third parable is three dimensional. There are lessons in the loving father, the prodigal son, and the elder brother. In this message, I want to focus on the prodigal son. The father teaches about the love of God. But the prodigal son teaches about the life of sin. The point is that lost people matter to God. But the downfall and restoration of the prodigal son reveals why God should matter to lost people. It is an inescapable fact every sinner needs to hear: You need God.

Two preachers were invited to preach the same event. They discussed their planned messages, as they traveled to the meeting. But when they saw the audience, composed of the poor and illiterate, they looked at one another with concern. “The sermon I have ready won't do here, I'm afraid,” said one. “Nor mine,” said the other. 'I'll tell you what,' said one to his fellow-preacher, 'I'll take the prodigal son out to the far country, and you bring him home again.'

In this message, I want to take the prodigal out to the far country and bring him back home to show you how much every person needs God. The prodigal son’s trip to the far country teaches us four dynamics of the life of sin.

I. THE DESIRE THAT MOTIVATES THE LIFE OF SIN

In verses 11-12, Jesus says: “There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.’” The prodigal son’s request was a declaration of independence. This is where sin begins. Beyond sinful words or deeds, sin is a matter of the heart. It is a heart of rebellion that strives for independence from God’s control over our lives and credit for our lives.

A. SPIRITUAL INDEPENDENCE DESIRES CONTROL OVER ONE’S LIFE.

In verse 12, the younger son said, “Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.” This is an unparalleled scenario. No son would dare initiate a conversation about his inheritance with his father. The father’s blessing was discussed at the father’s initiative and

bestowed at the father's discretion. Yet this son demanded his share of the estate. The father granted his son's request. Verse 13 says: "Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living." Having received his inheritance, the prodigal did not just move out of his father's house. He moved out of his father's country. It was not enough to move to the other side of the city. He went to the other side of the world. The term, "a far country," indicates this Jewish boy moved to a pagan land. It was a complete repudiation of his father's value system. He no longer had to submit to his father's rules. He no longer had to receive his father's permission. He no longer had to abide by his father's curfew. He was his own man now, not his father's son.

This is the story of every prodigal. We want to control our own lives, independent of God. In **Genesis 3:6**, the serpent explained why Eve should eat of the forbidden tree: "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." The first sin was the result of human ambition to be like God. So is every other sin. Our sinful nature does not want a relationship with God. We want to be our own gods. And we want to use the true God to help us serve ourselves better. Like the prodigal son, we want to be independent. But we want God to finance our independence. If he was a real man, he would have left and not asked for money to leave. The prodigal's request was proof he could not make it on his own. Yet he was determined to control his own life, independent of his father.

B. SPIRITUAL INDEPENDENCE DESIRES CREDIT FOR ONE'S LIFE.

The father financed his son's independence. But the son's grand plan would not work if he lived where everyone knew him. As he wore his fancy clothes, drove his big car, and enjoyed his plush condominium, no one in his hometown would have been impressed. They knew he had it going on because he was spending his father's money. So he took a journey to a far country where no one knew him. When this young hotshot moved to the big city, he could play the role of a self-made man. This is the desire that motivates the life of sin. We want control of our lives to take credit for our lives. **Romans 1:21** explains why the wrath of God is revealed against the unrighteousness of man: "For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him..." The sinful heart does not honor God because it desires to be honored as God. Our unrighteousness is exposed by our unwillingness to give thanks to God. This is not deep theology. It's basic etiquette. When a child receives a gift, the parents ask two questions: (1) Where did you get that from? (To ensure they did not steal it); and (2) What did you say? (To ensure they said, "Thank you.") The prodigal heart struggles to answer these questions. We want credit for our own lives. But **1 Corinthians 10:31** says, "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."

II. THE DILEMMA THAT CONFRONTS THE LIFE OF SIN

The prodigal's experience in the far country holds in tension two facts about the life of sin.

A. THE PLEASURES OF SIN ARE REAL.

Verse 13 says, “Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living.” In verse 30, the elder brother claims the prodigal wasted his inheritance on prostitutes. How would the elder brother know that for sure? The parable does not chronicle the prodigal’s spending spree in the far country. But it is safe to assume he had a good time. He “squandered his property in reckless living.” But he had fun doing it.

As we share the good news of God’s rescuing grace in Christ with lost people, we must be careful not to glorify the life of sin. We are to call prodigals home from the far country, not make the pig pen more attractive. Yet we should not assume that people in the far country are hurting, miserable, or troubled. The truth is that the life of sin can be pleasurable. What happens in the far country, stays in the far country! Being lost can be fun. In fact, there are many hardened sinners who are more healthy, wealthy, successful, prominent, and happy than faithful Christians. **1 Corinthians 15:19** says, “If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.” Some people claim the Christian life is worthwhile, even if Christianity is not true. But a righteous life is a worthless pursuit, if Jesus did not rise from the dead. If you live and die and that’s all, Christians are the most pitiful people on earth. We missed the party! **1 Corinthians 15:32** says: “If the dead are not raised, ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!’”

B. THE PLEASURES OF SIN ARE TEMPORARY.

Verse 14 says, “And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need.” The prodigal son had fun in the far country, until he spent everything, emptied his accounts, and maxed out his credit cards. Friends he had hooked up could not be found when he needed a hook-up. A recession hit the far country. The prodigal found himself in desperate need. The party was over! This is the dilemma that confronts the life of sin. Being lost can be fun. But it does not last. **Hebrews 11:24-25** says, “By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.” Sin is pleasurable. But the pleasures of sin are fleeting. In the economy of scripture, the true valuables last the longest. The sinful pleasures of the far country are never worth what they cost, because they are only temporary.

- Foolishness may interest you for a while, but it won’t last.
- Greed may thrill you for a while, but it won’t last.
- Immorality may gratify you for a while, but it won’t last.
- The nightlife may excite you for a while, but it won’t last.
- Strong drink may stimulate you for a while, but it won’t last.
- Ungodly companions may please you for a while, but it won’t last
- Worldly pleasures may satisfy you for a while, but it won’t last.

ONLY ONE LIFE, TWILL SOON BE PAST,
ONLY WHAT'S DONE FOR CHRIST WILL LAST.

III. THE DISCOVERY THAT CHANGES THE LIFE OF SIN

The prodigal son learned something about life, himself, and his father in the far country. The father did not teach him these lessons. Life caught up with him. Consider what the prodigal learned and where he learned it.

A. THE LESSON THAT SIN TEACHES.

Verses 14-17 says, "And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything." But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger!' When he spent everything, the prodigal recognized how good his father was. Hired servants in his father's house were well taken care of, while he went from herding pigs to herding with the pigs! So he made up his mind to go home to his father!

This is the inevitable lesson the life of sin teaches: You need God! Do not put anything or anyone ahead of God. You will need God to help you with those things, people, and situations. You cannot survive on the blessings of God. You need the God who blesses. **Psalm 127:1** says, "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain." The builder seeks accomplishment. The watchman sustains accomplishment. But without God, the house comes crashing down. Without God, the city is overthrown by its enemies. You need God. A thirty-seven-year-old wife and mother, **ANNIE HAWKS**, meditated on the goodness of God, as she cleaned her house. Considering God's blessings, it dawned on her how much she needed God. She stopped cleaning and wrote a poem that was later set to music:

I NEED THEE EVERY HOUR, MOST GRACIOUS LORD;
NO TENDER VOICE LIKE THINE CAN PEACE AFFORD.

I NEED THEE, OH, I NEED THEE; EVERY HOUR I NEED THEE;
OH, BLESS ME NOW, MY SAVIOR, I COME TO THEE.

B. THE CLASSROOM WHERE SIN TEACHES.

Verses 17 says, But when he came to himself, he said, "How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger." The prodigal son recognized how good his father was. But he did not learn this when he was in his father's

house. And he did not learn it in the far country. He learned it in the pig pen. The prodigal heart can be so stubborn in its rebellion against God that you may have to spend everything before you recognize your need for God.

IRENE JONES was my Sunday school teacher, when I was a boy. Each week, she prayed that I would not have a prodigal son experience. When I asked her about it, she explained that I knew the love of God at a young age. And it was her prayer that I would not stray away from God before I recognized what I already had in Christ. I did not get it then. I thought she was picking on the pastor's kid. In the providence of God, I became the pastor of the church I grew up in. Over the years, I ministered to people I grew up with after life caught up with them. It made me embarrassed about my testimony. But you should thank God for what he keeps you from, as well as what he brings you through. However...

- Some people lose it all before they come to themselves.
- Some people go to the pig pen before they recognize how good the Father is.
- Some people hit rock-bottom before they look up to God.

J.C. Ryle said, "Hell is truth known too late." Don't wait for life to catch up with you before you trust and obey the Lord. **2 Corinthians 6:2** says, "Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation."

IV. THE DELIVERANCE THAT REDEEMS THE LIFE OF SIN

Verses 17-19 says, "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'" The last time the prodigal saw his father, he demanded his inheritance. Now he would beg for a job! Life caught up with him and stripped him of his pride. Working harder in the pig pen could not fix the situation. He needed to go home. This the deliverance that redeems the life of sin. Come home!

- You can come home to God.
- You should come home to God.
- You must come home to God.

Will you come home to God today? Why won't you come home to God today?

If you come home to God, you do not have to worry or wonder about how God will respond. The elder brother had an attitude when the prodigal son returned. But not the loving father. Verses 20-24 says: "And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost,

and is found.' And they began to celebrate." This is the punchline of **Luke 15**. The religious leaders asked: "If Jesus really knows God, why is he partying with sinners?" Jesus answers: "If you really know God, why haven't you joined the party?" The heart of God celebrates when any prodigal comes home to him. Join the party! When the prodigal son came home, he found in his father's house the things he was looking for in the far country.

- The father put the best robe on him.
- The father put a ring on his finger.
- The father put shoes on his feet.
- The father killed the fattened calf.
- The father threw the mother of all parties to celebrate his return.
- The father even went into the field to plead with the elder brother to join the party!

God alone has everything your soul needs, spirit craves, heart desires, mind imagines, and strength pursues. In **John 10:10** Jesus said, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they might have life and have it abundantly." Come home!

Maria's husband died, not long after the birth of their daughter, Christina. She was forced to raise the girl on her own. When Christina came of age, Maria expected her to help carry the load. But Christina was fixated with life in the big city. Maria did everything she could to warn her daughter. But one morning, she woke up to find Christina and her belongings missing. Maria went to the big city to find Christina. Before she left, she took pictures of herself and placed them everywhere she could in the city. One day, Maria saw a posted picture of her mother. The note on the back read: "Wherever you are, whatever you've done, it doesn't matter. I love you. Come home. Christina did.

I'VE WANDERED FAR AWAY FROM GOD, NOW I'M COMING HOME;
THE PATHS OF SIN TOO LONG I'VE TROD, LORD, I'M COMING HOME.

I'VE WASTED MANY PRECIOUS YEARS, NOW I'M COMING HOME;
I NOW REPENT WITH BITTER TEARS, LORD, I'M COMING HOME.

I'M TIRED OF SIN AND STRAYING, LORD, NOW I'M COMING HOME;
I'LL TRUST THY LOVE, BELIEVE THY WORD, LORD, I'M COMING HOME.