

The Runaway

Luke 15:11-16

Manuscript and Discussion Guide for April 30, 2023

Stephen Davey

As Jesus continues to effectively use parables to reveal truths about the human condition to His audience, He's aware of the skepticism His message is facing from the Pharisees and religious leaders. And He has a story ready that will shake even them to their core. If you imagined the least desirable, the least redeemable, the lowest class of person you can think of, that's the man Jesus now presents to these leaders as an example of the indiscriminate grace of God.

Frank Sinatra was a famous recording artist in the mid-to-late 1950s, and he sold millions of albums in his day—back when albums actually consisted of physical records in the shape of a disk.

Sinatra recorded his most famous hit song in December 1968, and it rose up the charts of popularity. It stayed in the top 40 in Great Britain for months—longer than any other song had at the time and is still the record today.

The song was entitled, "My Way"; it had been composed by someone else who wanted to capture what he called the "freedom of his generation"—a generation that wanted to be freed from the moorings of what it considered a restrictive culture.

We now refer to that generation as the "Me Generation." It was all about them; the 1960s launched what is called the sexual revolution and everything else that came with it.

Frank Sinatra's song was the perfect song for all of that, but what I found surprising was that this song is one of the most often requested in Funeral Home services, if you can imagine it. Imagine people wanting to declare one more time, even after their death: "I did it my way."

It's actually a defiant song that perfectly articulates the human heart.

Some of the lyrics are these:

*I've lived a life that's full
I travelled each and every highway
And more, much more than this
I did it my way.*

Several sources said that this stanza was a not-so-subtle reference to defying God; the lyrics go:

*For what is a man, what has he got?
If not himself, then he has naught (in other words, all you need is yourself)
To say the things he truly feels
And not the words of one who kneels*

The record shows I ... did it my way.

Songwriters: Paul Anka, Gilles Thibaut, Claude Francois, Jacques Revaux, Jacques Revaux Adaptation De Paul Anka..

In the last moments of Frank Sinatra's life, on his deathbed at the age of 82, he looked up at his fourth wife and said, "I'm losing," and with that he died.

Now I'm not trying to disparage Frank Sinatra—I've never met him; I know very little about him. But I do know that he popularized the words of a defiant human heart, and the world ate it up.

But these lyrics are as old as mankind.

In fact, they trace all the way back to the Garden of Eden where Satan promised Eve she would really live if only she defied God and started living life her way. And Adam agreed. And the first couple became the first couple to run away and hide from God.

Human history is the ongoing story of prodigals, running from God, convinced by the lie that life is better without Him. *I will speak the things I truly feel; I will never kneel; I will live my way—let me just say, 'I did it, my way.'*

The religious leaders of Jesus' day would have said, "that's exactly how we expect sinners to act, and God doesn't care about them anyway."

The religious leaders believed and taught in Jesus' day that God rejoiced when a sinner died. The last thing they would ever imagine is that God would actually seek the lost.

But it's time to set the record straight, and Jesus does so in Luke's Gospel at chapter 15 with three parables. He describes God searching for lost valuables: a lost sheep, a lost coin, and now, a lost son.

This is the mission statement of Jesus Himself when He said, ***"For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save those who are lost (Luke 19:10).***

Now Luke is the only Gospel writer to record this third parable; your Bible might have outlined it in the margin as “The Parable of the Prodigal Son.”

It’s actually a parable about two sons; in fact, that’s how Jesus begins to tell it, here in **chapter 15 and verse 11:**

And he said, “There was a man who had two sons.”

Luke 15:11

Jesus will spend the same amount of time describing the interaction of this father with both of his sons.

Remember, these parables are in response to the Pharisees grumbling, back in **verse 2 where Luke wrote:**

And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”

Luke 15:2

They’re grumbling about sinners being saved, and Jesus tells them that heaven is rejoicing over sinners saved.

The younger son is represented by all these tax collectors and sinners who are invited by Jesus and the older son is represented by the religious leaders who’d followed all the rules.

This man had two sons; but let me tell you ahead of time:

- Both sons were lost;
- One son is lost as he leaves home and the other is lost while staying home;
- Both sons will defy their father’s wishes;
- Both sons will demonstrate a lack of love for their father;
- The older son seems to behave while the younger son doesn’t want to behave;
- But both sons are offered patience and grace as the father goes looking for them both;
- They both need a change of heart;
- They both need to repent—the younger one does, we’re not sure about the older one;

- Let me tell you, both sons need to be found.

This is the parable of two prodigals and the hero of the story is the father.

You might remember that a parable is an earthly story with eternal truths put alongside and there are a lot of eternal truths in this story.

Now if we were putting together a play bill for this drama, you could entitle the first scene:

Burning Bridges and Leaving Everyone Behind

Now verse 12:

“And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.’ And he divided his property between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country.

Luke 15:12-13a

According to Hebrew custom and the laws of inheritance, a father might choose to dole out a portion of his adult children’s inheritance while he was still living, the oldest son receiving a double portion and the younger sons receiving less; daughters as well could receive inheritances from their father’s will.

But the implication here is that this father is a widower; he’s much older now; his sons are grown men and he evidently doesn’t have any daughters, so the inheritance will be simple.

The older son will receive a 2/3 portion and the younger son 1/3 of the family estate.

But while the father could choose to do this while he’s alive, it would have been entirely improper for a son to demand it while his father was still alive.

And the younger son is demanding his share; he wants it *now*.

This would have been a shocking and heartless demand. He’s effectively saying to his father, *I’m tired of waiting for you to die so I can get my hands on what I’ve got coming.*

In a volume I have on Hebrew culture and customs, a demand like this was tantamount to this son telling his father, “I wish you were dead.”

Clinton E. Arnold, General Editor; Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Volume 1 (Zondervan, 2002), p. 447

He’s got a life he wants to start living; a life he’s been dreaming of and planning for; he’s tired of waiting for the old man to die so his dreams can be financed.

And since it doesn't look like his dad will die anytime soon, he finally drops the facade and says, "I'm tired of waiting; I want out! Give me what I've got coming and let me get out of here and start living my life *my way!*"

Within days the younger son will leave for a far country and a wild life, the same terms the apostle Paul will use for debauchery in Titus chapter 1: drunkenness and immorality.

So, Jesus is describing a prodigal who isn't just tired of waiting for his father to die, he's tired of living under his father's rules, his father's authority, his father's morality; you see his heart had left home years earlier.

But there's more here to his impatience. Since Jewish land didn't permanently transfer outside the family, and we don't see him later on driving cattle out of town, he's evidently not asking for 25 acres and a herd of cows.

In fact, the words Luke uses here aren't the normal words for an inheritance.

John MacArthur, [A Tale of Two Sons](#) (Thomas Nelson, 2008), p. 48

Luke gives us a clue again here in verse 13:

*"Not many days later, the younger son **gathered** all he had ..."*

Luke 15:13a

The word Luke uses here for gathered (*sunago*) has the sense of turning everything into currency. In other words, he has demanded the financial value of his inheritance; he wants to cash out.

Fritz Reinecker and Cleon Rogers, [Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament](#) (Regency, 1976), p. 187

David E. Garland, [Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Luke](#) (Zondervan, 2011), p. 624

Which would have been one more heartache for his father:

- The prodigal doesn't want to live on his portion of the land, he wants to leave the land;
- he doesn't want cattle, they will slow him down;
- he doesn't want responsibility, that gets in the way of freedom.

He doesn't want anything to do with the farm or the house or the heritage; he's fine leaving everyone behind and everything to his brother. He just wants money so he can buy a one-way ticket out of town.

He never expects to see his old father again, his family is as good as dead to him.

Let me tell you, all these Pharisees and scribes and attorneys of Mosaic law, they knew that this prodigal son was in fact as good as dead to his family and heritage.

It was not uncommon in these days for a funeral to be held for the prodigal who had disgraced his father and disowned his heritage and his family; he was effectively dead and gone forever.

Adapted from MacArthur, p. 46

Which is why the father will later refer to his son by saying in **verse 24: “For this my son was dead, and is alive again.”**

But for now, this prodigal son doesn't care, he's ready to strike up the band and start singing, “*My way—at last!*”

He's going to burn every bridge behind him, he probably thinks that will cement his resolve should he weaken later in his guilt; he wants to travel beyond the point of no return.

Who cares what anybody thinks? He will never see them again because he never intends to come back.

I imagine his father standing there on the roadside as he watches his son leave, perhaps never to return home again.

Maybe you've been there; maybe you're there right now; you know the taste of those tears as you've watched a loved one run away.

Scene One: Burning Bridges and Leaving Everyone Behind

I'll entitle scene two:

Pursuing Freedom with People already Enslaved

Verse 13 again:

“The younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living.”

Luke 15:13b

This **far country** implies that he's traveled outside of Jewish territory.

Bruce B. Barton, [Life Application Bible Commentary: Luke](#) (Tyndale, 1997), p. 372

Since he'll eventually try to survive while working on a hog farm, we have every indication that he's leaving Judaism behind; he's leaving his heritage and he is now literally in Gentile country.

To the audience Jesus is speaking to, here in chapter 15, everything in this story spells unclean, defiled, and impure.

He's arrived at some bustling city where he's going to live an unclean life in an unclean land.

But it's a small world. Somehow his older brother had heard about his lifestyle, he will later throw this back in his father's face in **verse 30**:

"This son of yours ... has devoured your property with prostitutes."

Luke 15:30

Look at what he did! Look at where he's been!

That describes in part what Luke writes here in **verse 13** that he **squandered his possessions**; literally, he threw his money around like a farmer's seed. He dove into— Luke writes—**reckless living**; this phrase refers to immoral behavior.

Zondervan Bible Backgrounds Commentary, p. 447

You can just imagine when he arrives in town, it doesn't take long for other prodigals to find him. He has money, and lots of it; he wants fun, and they know where to find it.

At this point, everybody wants to be his friend; he's finally found people who like him for who he wants to be; he's generous; he's open-minded.

Adapted from MacArthur, p. 62

He's the life of the party! In fact, he is financing the party. Being around him was like having one long weekend, one wild party that never ends.

But the truth was, his friends were just as lost as he was; what they enjoyed was nothing more than enslavement; they were using each other, and they were using him.

Behind the curtain of this drama was an unseen taskmaster, a cruel one who would never be able to clear their consciences; who would never be able to forgive their guilt; he would only hold on to them until they destroyed themselves.

The original tempter, Lucifer, having practiced on human beings for thousands of years, knew how enjoyment is the doorway into enslavement.

The apostle Paul reminded Titus with the warning that Christians "**were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures; but when the goodness and living kindness of God our Savior appeared, He saved us**" (Titus 3:3-4).

The prodigal is trying to enjoy freedom with people who are already enslaved to their passions and their pleasures.

But let me tell you, none of them, at this point, look miserable. They're having a great time; they're laughing it up and the prodigal steps up and pays for another round of drinks on the house! How they love him!

He's finally found people like himself, as far as he's concerned, he's finally home! He looks around and says, "Now this is home."

But everything is about to change. The party is about to come to a screeching halt.

We'll call this third scene:

Watching Wild Oats come to Harvest

Verse 14:

"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."

Luke 15:14-16

To a Jewish audience, the picture Jesus is painting here is of a life that is now completely beyond redemption.

MacArthur, p. 58

Beyond redemption.

Now maybe the thought crossed your mind, *Why did his father give him the money to begin with? He shouldn't have given him his legal right of inheritance.*

That was the law, but his father was not responsible for the free will of his son to sin—that was on his prodigal son.

But isn't God doing the same today? Doesn't He give to the world of people who defy Him, who run from Him, the good gifts of life and health, intelligence, wealth, talents, sight to enjoy the sunset and world around them; laughter with friends and family and a thousand more gifts? He allows them breath to enjoy, even though He knows they hate Him.

Adapted from R.C.H. Lenski, [The Interpretation of St. Luke's Gospel](#) (Augsburg Publishing House, 1946), p. 808

God is unlike us. His *goodness* leads us to repentance and when we repent, having come to life by His Spirit, our eyes are opened to how good He was to us even when we were running from Him.

Even then, He was patient and gracious and kind.

Now for this prodigal, he's landed here in the gutter; his wild oats have yielded their fruit; Jesus is now describing someone who simply can't get any more defiled.

To the Lord's audience, a Jewish man working for a hog farmer wanting to eat their slop is as low as someone could possibly go!

And this scene ends with the realization that must have shocked this prodigal to no end; Luke writes, and "***no one gave him anything.***"

He is abandoned by everyone just like he abandoned everyone.

I learned in my study that during these days, the Jewish people had created systems of welfare, what we would call 'crisis help' for members of the Jewish community who had fallen on hard times.

The prodigal son could have appealed to that system for clean clothes and a hot meal.

But the fact that he attached himself to a Gentile pig farmer gives us some insight into his heart that, at this point, remains stubborn and unrepentant.

Luke says here that he ***hired himself*** out, your translation might read: ***he joined himself to a citizen of that country.***

The language tells us that he insisted, he persisted, he wouldn't quit hounding this farmer until he was hired.

Reinecker, p. 188

In other words, he wasn't about to take a handout from Jewish benevolence; he's stubbornly saying, *I'm not going to admit I blew it; I'm not going to admit I trashed my life; I'm not going to admit how foolish I was and don't even think it: I am not going home.*

Pass me some more slop; I can take it.

Jesus doesn't add here how long the prodigal remained in this condition, but we have every reason to believe it was a good long while.

Let me pull aside from this parable, at this point, and give a couple of reminders for runaways:

Maybe you're one of them right now and no one knows it but you.

First, whenever you run away from God, freedom is just a mirage.

The prodigal had plenty of friends, but they only wanted to use him; they disappeared into thin air when he went broke.

He thought he'd found freedom but now he lives in fear.

He'd run away from God, and the road was a dead end.

Secondly, whenever you abandon truth, you are vulnerable to believing all sorts of lies.

In fact, you've already bought the lie that you can enjoy your life if you run away from God.

The truth is you will never enjoy the things money can buy if you reject the things money cannot buy.

Warren W. Wiersbe, Be Courageous (Victor Books, 1989), p. 25

Money cannot buy forgiveness; you cannot buy integrity; you cannot buy a clean conscience; you cannot buy true friendship; you cannot buy joy or hope.

Buy everything you want, but you cannot truly enjoy it unless you are accepting what God offers you for free.

Now, let me offer two principles for those who are praying for prodigals:

Ask God to help you build a bridge, not for compromising, but for communicating.

Offer words of support, not for their sinful lifestyle, but for their spiritual need. Keep the conversation open, as much as you can; lovingly insert gospel truth whenever appropriate.

The fact that the prodigal's older brother knew what his younger brother was up to implies this father knew where he was all along.

But he didn't send him money to finance a sinful lifestyle; he didn't invite his son to come home and set up a pigpen in the back yard.

But he did not disown him. As we'll see in our next session, when the prodigal returns, he calls him 'Father' and the 'father' calls him 'son.'

One more principle, secondly:

Don't pray for the prodigal's good fortune, pray for God to send a great famine.

Don't pray for good fortune, pray for a great famine.

As J.C. Ryle put it 100 years ago, a famine without to match the famine within.

Adapted from J.C. Ryle, Expository Thoughts on The Gospels: Luke (Evangelical Press, Original, 1879; reprint, 1975), p. 259

Lord, bring an emptiness on the outside to reveal the emptiness on the inside.

Even though you don't want someone you love to suffer, whether it's your spouse who has wandered away from God, or an adult child, or a parent or a friend who've turned their backs on everything they know about God.

Don't pray that God will keep them out of the fire, pray that God will heat it up; not that God will keep them from disaster, but that God will use anything, including disaster to open their eyes to the disaster of their choices and the reality of their sin and shame.

Prodigals don't usually come to their senses in the father's house; they tend to come to their senses in the pigpen of life.

© Copyright 2020 Stephen Davey
All rights reserved.

Access the complete archive of Stephen Davey's teaching ministry at
wisdomonline.org or on the **Wisdom for the Heart app**.