

The Father

Luke 15:20-24

Manuscript and Discussion Guide for May 14, 2023

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The prodigal son prepared to return home with the posture of humility but a heart of pride. He concocted a plan to save face, restore his dignity and increase his status. As he journeyed home, he rehearsed exactly what he would say. But when he arrived in town, the prodigal was confounded by a level of grace so unexpected and irresistible, he forgot his plan entirely. God continues to blow people away with His grace and forgiveness in our world today.

In the biography of Louie Zamperini entitled *Unbroken*, Louie recalled major events in his life. He enlisted and served during World War II; his plane crashed, and he landed in the ocean where he and three other survivors drifted for nearly two months, before being picked up by enemy soldiers. He would endure life as a prisoner of war until the war ended.

Earlier in his life, as a young man, he lived in Southern California with his Italian immigrant parents. He developed a reputation for fighting and stealing. He certainly wasn't interested in his parents' religion.

One day he became angry with his parents and decided it was time to strike out on his own. His parents pleaded with him to stay, but when he refused, Louie's mother packed him a sandwich and his father gave him \$2, which in that day was a great sacrifice.

He and a friend hopped a train and headed north. But running away wasn't quite the adventure he thought it would be. They barely escaped the sweltering heat of a box car which had closed and locked on them. At another point in their journey, they were discovered in a train car and forced at gunpoint to jump off the train while it was still moving.

After a few days, they wound up sitting in a railway yard, bruised, sunburned, tired, filthy, sharing the only thing they had to eat: a can of stolen beans.

At that point, Zamperini says, he “remembered the money in his father’s hand, the hurt and fear in his mother’s eyes—and he got up and headed home.”

Later in life he attended the Los Angeles Crusade and gave his life to Christ. Just a few years ago, The Billy Graham Association released a documentary on his life and testimony, and they called it, *Captured by Grace*.

Wikipedia: Louie Zamperini

Laura Hillenbrand, *Unbroken* (Random House, 2010), p. 11

That’s the perfect title to the drama we’ve been watching here in Luke 15. Luke is the only Gospel writer to include what is traditionally called the Parable of the Prodigal Son. William Barclay called it, “the greatest short story of all time.”

William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke* (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 204

Now in order to appreciate what the father is about to do, and why, we need to climb back into this documentary. If you’re new to our study in Luke 15, this review will be helpful.

Jesus is teaching the religious leaders the value of a sinner’s life and eternal destiny. He’s also teaching them something they’d never conceive of on their own and that’s the fact that celebration breaks out in heaven whenever a sinner is saved.

Whenever a lost sheep or a lost coin is found, Jesus says here ***in verse 10:***

“I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Luke 15:10b

And now the Lord delivers one of the longest, most moving parables of all, about a man who had two sons. And they were both prodigals. One prodigal is about to run away from home and the other prodigal is still living at home.

But the younger of these two grown sons has had enough. He’s tired of waiting for his father to die so he can get his hands on his inheritance.

He’s fed up with the rules, the responsibilities of farm life; most of all, he’s tired of the religion of his Jewish father; he wants nothing to do with the God of Israel.

Adapted from John Phillips, *Exploring the Gospel of Luke* (Kregel, 2005), p. 211

He’s going to run away from it all. The truth is, he’s been a prodigal longer than he’s been a runaway. He’s been making plans for quite some time.

And now, to the shame of his father and his entire community, he cashes out his inheritance, stuffs his money belt full and heads out of town.

He chooses a Gentile region—a place where he doesn't have to worry about people recognizing him, or being found by a synagogue leader who might know his father.

Jesus doesn't mention where he lands, the Lord simply calls it a "far country." That "far country" might've been a suggestion that this was far away from God.

Well, wherever he ended up, it was party time! He wasn't holding back. The Lord called it here in **verse 13, reckless living**. It's an expression for drunkenness and immorality.

This was the life he'd been waiting for, he thought he'd found freedom, but the truth was, all of his new friends were already enslaved.

Now Jesus adds to the drama by telling his audience that a famine swept into that region. Everybody was hungry; and all his friends disappeared as soon as his money ran out.

Now at this point, he's too stubborn to ask for help from the Jewish community, which had systems of benevolence for Israelites trapped in desperate situations.

But not now; not for him. He's not about to ask for help; his pride is still intact. He can handle this on his own.

But he obviously needs a job and because this famine, nobody gives him one; but then a pig farmer finally agrees to hire him; but the farmer is more interested in feeding the pigs than he is in feeding this runaway.

So now it's reached that critical stage: the prodigal is homeless; he's filthy; he's exhausted; he's desperate.

What he thinks he *needs* is some more of his father's money.

So there in the pig pen, he hatches a plan: he'll take his medicine and apologize, not completely or sincerely, but hopefully enough to butter up his dad to pony up some more money.

Let's pick it back up with the speech he planned to deliver to his dad, here in **verse 18**:

"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.""

Luke 15:18-19

"I have sinned against heaven and before you" is as generic and vague as you can possibly apologize or confess to someone.

The Greek translation of the Old Testament has Pharaoh saying the same thing to Moses, Pharaoh actually said, “I have sinned against God and against you.”

All that means is, “I’m sorry for doing something wrong to you, so please get me out of these consequences.”

The expression here, “I am no longer worthy to be called your son” was true, but in this case, he’s only stating the facts of his disinherited status.

He’s out of the family and he knows it. He’s already disowned them!

You might notice here that he does not plan on asking his dad for forgiveness and we know that because of **verse 19**. He finally gets to the point where he wants to negotiate with his dad in the last part of the verse:

““Treat me as one of your hired servants.””

Luke 15:19b

“Treat me” can be rendered, “make of me,” and notice he’s not asking, he’s demanding.

“Make of me as one of your hired servants.” Underline that word, “hired.” The word for servant here isn’t the typical word either for a household servant or a slave.

This is a term for a skilled craftsman.

They lived independently in the village; they were skilled in their trade, and they came to work on his father’s estate and were paid an income to do so.

Adapted from Kenneth E. Bailey, The Cross & the Prodigal (IVP Books, 2005), p. 61

So, make me one of them!

He’s not going to ask for forgiveness, he’s asking for financial backing, another angle into an independent life.

So, with that plan in mind, the prodigal heads toward home.

Now, let me tell you, the Pharisees and the religious leaders know exactly what’s going to happen—at least, what should happen as far as they’re concerned.

But what unfolds is shocking. **Three surprising scenes now take place.**

Scene 1 highlights the father’s grace.

Verse 20:

“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.”

Luke 15:20

He was still **a long way off**, indicating that this took place during the day with plenty of sunlight. This meant the village center was full of people. The markets were busy. As he approaches the village, he would've been recognized, dirt and all.

John MacArthur, *A Tale of Two Sons* (Thomas Nelson, 2008), p. 112

The father sees him, indicating he's either been alerted, or that he's been watching that road for some time.

Again, from the fact that the older brother says later on that the younger son spent his money on prostitutes, the implication is that they know what he's been doing, and they know where he's been living.

Every time Dad walks outside, he looks down that long road.

Jesus says, **the father sees him and is moved with compassion**. Compassion is a word that literally refers to the stomach, the innards, the abdomen.

The secular world was teaching that since you felt anguish, or fear or that sickening feeling of dread in your stomach, that the stomach was the seat of emotions.

To this day, we say that our stomach is in knots; we talk about having a gut feeling; we complain that we don't have the stomach for something anymore.

The Hebrew world believed as well that the stomach area was the center of affection and compassion and love.

Ibid, p. 68

That isn't going to work very well with the Hallmark brand. "I love you with all my stomach" just won't sell many cards.

The father here is moved in his inward being and he feels it in his stomach. And when he reaches his son, he kisses him repeatedly and embraces him.

He's showing his son great affection and how much he missed him. By the way, he could have easily never shown up, or at last shown up with a cold shoulder. But not this father.

Now, this parable isn't intended to be a journal on parental affection, but we ought to stop long enough to at least take note that Jesus is endorsing a father showing his son affection.

Have you ever seen that commercial on TV where some big marine comes home for Christmas. They don't know he's coming home; he slips in the front door and his little brother sees him, runs over and they have this big hug. Mom sees him and tears come to her eyes as she hugs him; then Dad comes over—and shakes his hand. Shakes his hand?!

Maybe you're thinking, I'm like that, you know. I don't hug anybody around my house. Well, you ought to try it sometime, you big grouch! There's no telling what might happen.

Now to the audience listening here, the most surprising thing the father does is **run**. Not in our culture, but in this culture, and in this part of the oriental world, older men didn't run.

One scholar writes that running was considered beneath the dignified posture of a Middle eastern elder; to run would suggest that he was not in control of his time or resources. A man was known in this world by his pace that signified dignity and stature in the community.

David E. Garland, [Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Luke](#) (Zondervan, 2011), p. 628

In addition to that, to run would require the father to pull up his long robes, exposing his bare legs, which would have been unthinkable in this culture.

He's doing all of that here. And he's not just running, he's racing. The same word is used by the apostle Paul in 2 Thessalonians 3:1, "Pray for us that the word of the Lord may speed ahead."

That's my theme verse on my drive to church! It's taped on my dashboard.

The word is used in Hebrews 12 for running a race.

But why is the father racing? In fact, the question is better understood, who is he racing?

Jesus' audience would've known. The elders of this village would've known.

The father knew that his son would face a mob of villagers who have felt the shame of his betrayal.

Kenneth E. Bailey, [Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes](#) (Eerdmans Publishing, 1983), p. 181

Having defied his father, having shamed his Jewish heritage; having spent his inheritance—which belonged in the Jewish community—on Gentiles, not just spent it, but given it to Gentiles and spent it on Gentile prostitutes—this village could turn into a mob and stone him to death.

But the stones will have to hit his father first, for the father is embracing him; he will be bruised for his son.

So, at worst, he could be killed; at best, and more than likely in the first century, the villagers will beat him, and turn him away only after a public ceremony of shame, a ceremony called the Kezazah ceremony.

When a Jewish prodigal left the community and went and lived with Gentiles and lost his wealth among the Gentiles, and then tried to return, he could expect the elders to sit him at the city gates, fill a pot with burnt beans and throw it in front of him, breaking open the pot, signifying that his relationship with their community was forever broken and he would receive nothing from them.

Ibid, p. 168

This prodigal knows all about that and so do the religious leaders and everybody else listening to Jesus. This is what they were expecting to happen.

The prodigal deserves nothing less than to be cut off; if not killed, then certainly banished forever.

And the father knows it too and he's racing to get to him first.

This is the only time in Scripture that God is pictured in a hurry, racing, eager to reconcile.

What a picture of the incarnation! This is where the parable becomes a picture of God the Son stepping out of the Father's house and running to seek and to save—to bear our shame and take our punishment, to be bruised for our iniquities.

So, he reaches his son first, with household servants huffing and puffing behind.

And his son is now stunned by his father's response. He had never dreamed that he would be welcomed home, embraced, kissed; if anything, he would be expected to fall down in the dirt and kiss his father's feet.

This isn't what he expected; he hasn't even begun to deliver his planned speech, negotiating his own terms.

After all the hugs and kisses and tears—no doubt with this overwhelming demonstration of compassion and grace—scene 2 opens.

The first scene highlights the father's grace.

Scene 2 now highlights the son's guilt.

Verse 21:

"And the son says to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'"

Period.

Now keep in mind that after the father's emotional welcome here, the son could be emboldened to carry out his plan, to manipulate his father's heart. I mean, this is perfect; his negotiation should go better than he expected; his dad will most certainly give in to financing his apprenticeship in the village.

His dad is putty in his hands.

But instead, no doubt stunned by his father's grace and compassion, his own heart is moved; he changes the direction of his speech—it's no longer moving toward a demand for financial help and independence.

He begins by saying the same words he had planned to say, but now the words have an entirely different tone and we know that because he ends with the reality and recognition and true confession: ***"I have sinned against heaven and against you, I am no longer worthy to be your son."***

Period.

No negotiation; just humble, true confession.

He is effectively leaving his destiny entirely in his father's hands.

Ibid

Following this genuine confession, his father demonstrates reconciliation by giving him some significant gifts of grace.

Scene 3 highlights the father's gifts.

Notice verse 22:

"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.'"

Bring the best robe; literally, the first robe.

The Lord's audience would have immediately understood this robe to be the father's robe, worn on feast days and grand occasions.

Bailey, 185

Don't miss this: this was the father's robe.

And besides, the prodigal no longer has a robe; there's nothing hanging in his closet back at the house; his closet is empty after he sold everything off to run away.

And would you notice the father says, "Bring the robe quickly and put it on him."

Why quickly? What's the rush?

The villagers are coming; the elders are going to be arriving and they've got a jar filled with burnt beans to cast this son out forever.

But when they arrive and see the son wearing his father's robe, they will immediately understand that there has been reconciliation; the son now stands under the protection of his father, if you will, he stands before the villagers clothed with the reputation of his father.

This is salvation.

Jesus no doubt wants these religious leaders to connect the dots of His parable with the prophet Isaiah who said; "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, for He has clothed me with the garment of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness" (Isaiah 61:10).

The father isn't finished here: "And put a ring on his finger," this is a reference to the signet ring bearing the family crest; it would be pressed in wax to seal official documents.

The father is giving his son this ring as a symbol of authority whereby he can transact business in his father's name.

And likewise, you and I, beloved, are transacting eternal business in God's name.

The father commands further, put shoes/sandals on his feet.

Slaves and poor people went barefoot; members of the family household did not.

MacArthur, p. 71

This was a symbol of family acceptance; he's a member of the father's household.

So, the villagers arrive and see what the father has done, they are equally stunned by the father's grace and gifts to his now humble and repentant son.

And when they arrive, they are evidently given an invitation. The father says here in verse 23:

"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."

Luke 15:23-24

Now had this been a celebration for the immediate household, one sheep would have been plenty.

But this is a fattened calf. The Greek word literally means a grain-fed calf, this was 400+ pounds of prime beef. The father is throwing a village wide celebration; he's making a public statement that his son has returned!

Bailey, p. 72

MacArthur, p. 138

What did this son do to deserve any of it? What could this son do to earn it?

Nothing! You don't earn this; you don't pay for the gifts of God's grace. "Jesus paid it all, all to Him I owe. Sin had left a crimson stain, He washed it white as snow."

Imagine you are invited to the White House for a banquet. You are seated at a table loaded down with delicious food, artistically plated; the dessert choices are amazing—every one of them made of chocolate—and when it comes time to leave, the president stands at the door to greet everyone.

What do you do? I know, you reach into your pocket and pull out a nickel. And as you leave, you press it into his hand and say, "Mr. President, thank you for your invitation, the meal was spectacular and I'm sure very expensive. So, I'd like to help you pay for the meal—here's a nickel."

William MacDonald, quoted by Charles R. Swindoll, [The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart](#) (Word Publishing, 1998), p.

You would probably disappear somewhere out there in Guantanamo Bay!

Here's the gospel.

Jesus Christ left His Father's house to give you an invitation to come home to His home. He came to bear your shame, to be bruised for your iniquities, to pay for your passage back to the Father's house.

You think the world is having a party down here? Just wait till you get there; the celebration over sinners saved by the grace of God is actually going on right now. Jesus said so, and let me tell you, that celebration will never end.

We were captured by sin; we are forever captured by the grace of God.

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