

# *The Homecoming*

February 23, 2003

## Sermon Background Study

*Scripture Passage – Luke 15:11-32* (from *The Message* – a paraphrase of the Bible by Eugene Peterson)

Then he [Jesus] said, “There was once a man who had two sons. The younger said to his father, ‘Father, I want right now what’s coming to me.’

“So the father divided the property between them. It wasn’t long before the younger son packed his bags and left for a distant country. There, undisciplined and dissipated, he wasted everything he had. After he had gone through all his money, there was a bad famine all through that country and he began to hurt. He signed on with a citizen there who assigned him to his fields to slop the pigs. He was so hungry he would have eaten the corncobs in the pig slop, but no one would give him any.

“That brought him to his senses. He said, ‘All those farmhands working for my father sit down to three meals a day, and here I am starving to death. I’m going back to my father. I’ll say to him, “Father, I’ve sinned against God, I’ve sinned before you; I don’t deserve to be called your son. Take me on as a hired hand.”’ He got right up and went home to his father.

“When he was still a long way off, his father saw him. His heart pounding, he ran out, embraced him, and kissed him. The son started his speech: ‘Father, I’ve sinned against God, I’ve sinned before you; I don’t deserve to be called your son ever again.’

“But the father wasn’t listening. He was calling to the servants, ‘Quick. Bring a clean set of clothes and dress him. Put the family ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Then get a grain-fed heifer and roast it. We’re going to feast! We’re going to have a wonderful time! My son is here—given up for dead and now alive! Given up for lost and now found!’ And they began to have a wonderful time.

“All this time his older son was out in the field. When the day’s work was done he came in. As he approached the house, he heard the music and dancing. Calling over one of the houseboys, he asked what was going on. He told him, ‘Your brother came home. Your father has ordered a feast – barbecued beef! – because he has him home safe and sound.’

“The older brother stalked off in an angry sulk and refused to join in. His father came out and tried to talk to him, but he wouldn’t listen. The son said, ‘Look how many years I’ve stayed here serving you, never giving you one moment of grief, but have you ever thrown a party for me and my friends? Then this son of yours who has thrown away your money on whores shows up and you go all out with a feast!’

“His father said, ‘Son, you don’t understand. You’re with me all the time, and everything that is mine is yours—but this is a wonderful time, and we had to celebrate. This brother of yours was dead, and he’s alive! He was lost, and he’s found!’”

### *The Parable of a Father and Two Sons*

One of the most familiar of all Jesus’ parables, you probably know today’s scripture passage as “The Parable of the Prodigal<sup>1</sup> Son.” The trouble with this title or any other is that the title immediately takes your attention to one character or aspect of the story. But, I have on my desk nine different commentaries on this parable and each one takes a somewhat different tack. Some authors identify with the father and his boundless joy at the return of the younger son. Other authors want to focus on the reaction of the elder son and his declaration of unfairness. All of these are helpful, but this is an incredibly rich and complex story which will repay many return visits. Read it at different times in your own life and you will hear a message you hadn’t heard before. Thus, rather than provide you with one explanation among many, I’ll give you some background that may help you to see the surprises.

### *Some Helpful Background*

- This parable and the two that immediately precede it are Jesus’ response to chattering among some Pharisees who are appalled that Jesus eats with tax collectors and assorted sinners. Tax collectors were despised by Jews because they worked as “entrepreneurs” who would collect as much money as they

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<sup>1</sup> “Prodigal” is not a word most of us use. It means to spend lavishly or foolishly.

could, send to Rome what the empire required, and then keep the rest. They were seen as Jews who had sold-out to the pagan oppressors.

- When the younger son asks for his inheritance, it would have been shameful and humiliating for the father. The son is dishonoring his father, in violation of Torah. It is as if he wishes the father dead. Indeed, in the original Greek, the father literally divides his *bios*, his “life,” between the two sons. Jesus’ listeners would have understood how much the father had been shamed, making the father’s joyful and unconditional welcome all the more shocking. Indeed, most listeners probably thought that the father had been pampering an immoral and poorly raised son.
- We all know that Jews don’t eat pork. But under the OT law, Jews were forbidden from even touching the carcass of a dead pig (Leviticus 11:7-8). Jesus shows the younger brother caring for swine (and even willing to eat what they eat!) so that Jesus’ listeners will understand that the young man could sink no lower. He had rendered himself unclean and placed himself outside the covenant with God. Jesus’ listeners would have been happy for the story to end there and probably expected it to. The wayward son had gotten what he was due for dishonoring his father.
- When the younger son returns, the father runs to greet him. Running was seen as undignified for an elderly Jewish man. Given the typical attire, he would have had to grab up the hem of his long robe and go charging down the path! The father gives the son the family ring and sandals because they are both symbols that the father is welcoming him as a son, even though the younger son has said he’d be happy to return home as a hired hand. To Jesus’ listeners, the father’s complete and unquestioning welcome would have been shocking and offensive; doesn’t the father have any pride!
- The elder son’s behavior is also very insulting to the father. His refusal to enter the house or even speak to his father was an offense that would warrant a beating! Note that Jesus’ doesn’t tell us the response of the elder son. The parable ends with the conclusion up in the air.

### Jesus Tells Three Parables

Any biblical passage is easier to understand if we put it in context. This is true even of the parables. Though each parable is its own self-contained story, you’ll find it helpful to look at the paragraphs immediately preceding and following a parable. Today’s parable is a good example.

In the opening verses of chapter 15, Luke tells us that assorted tax collectors and sinners are gathered around Jesus. Nearby Pharisees are offended that Jesus would welcome all the wrong sorts of people into his company. After all, the Pharisees wouldn’t be seen in such company, much less eat with them. Jesus responds to the Pharisees by telling three parables. The first parable is about a shepherd’s joy in finding one lost sheep from a flock of one hundred (15:3-7). The second parable is about the joy of a woman who lost a single coin and then found it, after working long and hard to find it (v. 8-10). Finally, Jesus turns to today’s parable and a father’s joy in finding a long-lost son. It doesn’t take much imagination to predict the reaction of those who criticized Jesus’ welcoming of sinners.

### *A few reflections*

You can almost picture Jesus turning his gaze to the nearby Pharisees as the story moves to the reaction of the elder son. Could Jesus possibly mean that they, the defenders of the faith, were as the elder brother, unable to see the power of God’s grace and forgiveness. Through the OT prophets, God had promised a celebration upon the restoration of Israel. How could Jesus imply that they, the Pharisees, would be left out while all the wrong sorts would enjoy the barbecue!

You can also picture the joy and wonder that must have come across the faces of the “tax collectors and sinners” as the story unfolded, a story of absolute and unconditional forgiveness; a story in which all are welcome to God’s party. It is no accident that Jesus hung out with the outcasts of society. By his very symbolic actions – like eating with tax collectors – he demonstrated that *everyone* could be forgiven and welcomed into God’s kingdom.

In the same way, it isn’t hard to imagine the hope that must have sprung up in the hearts of all those nearby who were neither Pharisees nor obvious “sinners.” It is a story that Jesus’ fellow Jews wanted to hear, a story of exile and restoration. Perhaps, after so many centuries of oppression, God was at last going to forgive the sins of Israel and truly deliver them from exile, ushering in the kingdom of God. It just didn’t seem to look like what they thought it would.

## Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Luke 15:1-32 The entire sequence of “lost &amp; found” parables</p>	<p>Day 2 Luke 16:1-13 The parable of the dishonest steward. Why might this parable immediately follow the “lost/found” parables?</p>
<p>Day 3 Zephaniah 3:14-20 Celebrating Israel’s return from exile (see v.17)</p>	<p>Day 4 Genesis 4:1-16 Another story of two brothers</p>
<p>Day 5 Genesis 26:34 – 28:4 Another story of a father, two sons, and rivalry!</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

## Sermon Notes

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### Spring Bible Academy Session begins March 24!

We'll be offering a variety of daytime and evening classes. Information on all the classes will be coming in your newsletter. I'll be teaching two courses. On Monday evenings, I'll teach *Introducing the New Testament* which was first offered last spring. This class provides an overview of the books of the New Testament, the life of Jesus, and the first decades after Jesus' resurrection. On Monday mornings and Tuesday evenings, I'll teach *Our Life in the Spirit*. We'll look at the biblical understanding of what it means to live an authentic Christian life – growing in discipleship and empowered by the Holy Spirit. We'll also learn what it means to live in community with other Christians as the body of Christ. Both of these classes are lecture-oriented and are suitable for those who know little about the Bible. I hope you'll join us.

*Scott Engle*

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. How do you think you would react if you were the father in the story? Would it make you want to do unto the son as he had done unto you? Sometimes, as children separate themselves from their parents to build their own lives, parents respond by emotionally separating from their children. But, in this model of parental love, the father's love is profound and unconditional. What can we do to build such relationships with our own children or with our own parents? What are the biggest barriers?
2. I've raised three sons and I can't tell you how often I've heard, "That's not fair!" I usually respond with something like, "Maybe, but life isn't fair." [I guess that sounds pretty lame sometimes!] To the elder brother, the father's open-armed welcoming of the "family ne'er-do-well" is overwhelmingly unfair! Why is fairness so important to people? What do you think this parable teaches about fairness? Do you truly want God to be fair with you?
3. In this story, the errant son is welcomed back with a party, with singing and dancing! The whole neighborhood is invited to the celebration. Is this how we welcome back those in our own lives who have hurt us or offended us? If we welcome them at all, do we expect that they will spend some time in penance, showing us the contrition we think we are owed? Notice in the parable that the father wasn't even listening as the son apologized!