

Home for Christmas

(Part 1)

Luke 15:11–32 NIV84

There's a little bit of “prodigal” in all of us, and we probably have family members who have lost their way - family members who have walked with Jesus and grew up in church but yet walked away. You can always look back and see that maybe there were things that led to this, but it's not always that clear. We pray for them and believe that God is going to bring them back. *Why?* Because we have hope and we have history in God. We believe that God's heart is for prodigals to come *home*.

We're talking today about the Prodigal Son story. Jesus, when he was with his disciples, told them this parable because his desire is to see the prodigals come back home. Christmas season can always be a difficult time. It's when prodigals' absence is noticed more - not that we don't think about them *all* the time - but there's something about Thanksgiving and especially Christmas, that just resonates with *family*.

When someone's not at the table, and there's an empty chair where there used to be someone, it's a heart-breaker. Even though Christmas and Thanksgiving are times of celebration, the reality is that while we're celebrating on one hand, we're also suffering on the other because we see the empty chair. We remember these times in the past where they were sitting at the table and we did life together. We normally tend to think everything's going to be okay and we're going to grow old together - going to have the same conversations about life and memories - but then life happens and people *disappear*. They wander away. They *drift*.

We know there's a real enemy - a real devil - a real Satan - and his worst violations are always against relationship. There's always something going sideways in a relationship. We've all had relational breaks and fractures through the years, and when we sat down to reconcile or talk about it or maybe some time passed and we found each other again, nine times out of ten, we couldn't even remember what *caused* them.

The Bible says that God has given us the ministry of reconciliation. In other words, there's an anointing and a grace for reconciliation. It's when we're going through things that are hard and difficult that we tend to think we're the only ones. It's when we can't see the forest for the trees in a prodigal mindset. Our body may be here, but our heart may *not* be. We may be barely hanging on. We may have thought about walking away and contemplating just moving on, saying, *"I'm kind of tired of the struggle. I'm exhausted."* But God is saying, *"Don't go. Don't cut and run. Don't quit. Don't give up."*

We might be friends, parents, grandparents of prodigals - or we may even have prodigal *parents* - and we shouldn't give up *praying* for our prodigals. They need us to pray them back home. They need us to intercede on their behalf. The word intercession means *"to come between."* They need us to get in-between what's going on that drove them into running away, and we need to intercede for them and fight for them. Most of us have had people through the years and on various occasions who have prayed for us - they have contended and fought for us.

We've all had opportunities to run, but not all of us *did*. Christmas, itself, is a season of homecoming, and wouldn't that be amazing this Christmas? As we pray and believe for *our* prodigals, we need to have high expectations for a turn, but low expectations for the way it happens. In some scenarios, that might just mean sending a text. In others, maybe a call is required. And, of course, the greatest scenario would be a *physical* homecoming. But in all of those, we should take the win. Let's pray and believe for reconnection with our prodigals this holiday season.

Luke 15:11-19 NIV - The Parable of the Lost Son

"There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.'"

A Season of Wandering

"The prodigal set off for a distant country." Prodigals create distance spiritually, relationally, and emotionally. There are times when we move away from the centerline in our walk with Jesus. It's typically a breach spiritually - maybe we aren't reading the Bible like we used to. Maybe we're not *praying* like we used to. Maybe we let things come in and we don't want to pray because then our heart will be convicted, so we keep things at a distance. We create distance between us and the Father.

Prodigals will also create distance relationally. It'll be a breach of relationship - putting somebody at arms length - pushing somebody away. Why? Because sometimes it hurts when people get too close. Someone once said, *"When you're in sin, you're insane - you're out of your mind - you're not in your right mind."* What happens is we get confused. We get broken and then we're out of our mind.

Because of sin, we don't want to get back into that relationship, because to be around the people we love the most is too painful because it reminds us of our failure. It reminds us of our own sin. It reminds us of our own mistakes. It reminds us of our own mis-fires and mishaps. Then, we also create distance emotionally. It just hurts too much to be around God, to read the Bible, to go to church, to be around family, or to be around the people who love us enough to speak the truth and to say what needs to be said.

Sometimes we find ourselves at a place where we really kind of *know* the truth, but don't want anybody to say it *out loud*. We've all been there. This isn't just a theological idea or construct. This is not an abstract idea. We all know what it's like to not want to be around certain people just because they're so "on" with Jesus that we feel convicted just being in their presence, so we create distance spiritually, relationally, and emotionally.

The prodigal son: modern-versus-ancient interpretation.

How did people in the first century interpret this story? There are things that are contextual to them and that they understand culturally that we as Americans many years later in the west don't. The modern view of the story is this, that the son is just immature and made poor decisions - no big deal. Or, he's running away, which means he was just seeking his freedom, which some people would say was a *good* thing: *"I need to fly. I need to cut the cord and get out on my own. I need to sow my wild oats. I need to discover."*

The modern view of the story is that it's all about *forgiveness*. That's because we don't understand the meaning or the historical context. Here's the ancient first-century view: The son went to the father and asked for his inheritance while his father was still alive. From a first-century view, the son was saying to his father, *"I wish you were dead."* We don't get that, but that's exactly what he was saying. It was severe *dis*-honor in a culture where honor was one of the highest values. For someone to turn against their family, against God, or against a friend they were in covenant with, could literally be worthy of death.

The son's request equaled breaking covenant-identity and saying, *"I don't want any of it. I'm shedding my identity. I'm leaving. I'm running away."* This would have been absolutely scandalous. But the son ends up working for a *pig* farmer. In the Jewish culture, they don't *do* pigs. They don't do *bacon*. In the Levitical law, it's considered the most unclean thing one can eat. And he ends up working for a *pig farmer*. It's the ultimate unclean act. He was utterly and completely defiled, and would have never been welcomed back into the temple, into his family, that village, or his community again.

Luke 15:20-21 NIV

"So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'"

To a first-century person in Israel, the father running was radical shame-bearing to protect his son. The Bible says that the father had to hike his robe up and show his legs which was an absolute disgrace. When Jesus was telling the story, there would have been audible gasps and maybe even people yelling out loud where they would have been so incensed and so angry as he told the story. They would have said it was blasphemous and scandalous. The father took the shame of his own son on himself to deflect the shame of the son to the village and the community.

That's what our Heavenly Father has done for *us* - he absorbed *shame* to redeem the lost. This is the heart and soul of the story. When Jesus told this story, it would have been shocking. Actually, there were similar stories in the culture about a prodigal son. In those stories, however, the father did not run to the son. In the historical Jewish version of it, the father turned his *back* on the son. He *shunned* him when he came home - but not in Jesus' story.

As the prodigal made his way back, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him. The prodigal reeked of being with pigs. He was the lowest of the low. Jesus tells it this way: *"He was a long way off. His father saw him, was filled with compassion for him. He ran to his son."* This is the only place in the Bible depicting God in a hurry to do anything. The father ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him in all of his filth and stink and he welcomed him home. The father was watching the road. And here's how he was watching it - he was watching it *hopeful* - he was watching it *prayerful* - and he was watching it with *patience*.

How are we watching for our prodigals? Are we hopeful? The word *hope*, biblically, means *confident and joyful expectation of a desired good*. Are we prayerful? Are we praying *for* them? Not praying *mad* or praying stuff *towards* them. No. We're to pray for them. And are we praying patiently? God's a God of timing, sequence, and order. When we're praying for our prodigals, we might want to give God time to work and orchestrate events and set things into motion to get them to come to their senses and wake up. We wait like heaven waits. We wait in prayer, but not *passively*. We're to pray actively.

Luke 18:1-8 NIV84 - The Persistent Widow

"Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. He said: 'In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.' For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care what people think, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually come and attack me!' And the Lord said, 'Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?' "

Jesus said, *"This is how I want you to pray. I want you to be persistent. I want you to go to my Dad's house, bang on the door until you get what you came for."* This is how Jesus said to pray. Imagine God going, *"Whoa, Jesus, calm down, Son. Wait a minute. If you do that, these people are going to be beating on my door all day long."* It's *exactly* what Jesus intended. He set it up so that we would go to the Father and not relent, not give up, and not grow weary while doing good. That's how we're to pray for our prodigals.

"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' " When we repent, God moves faster toward us than we can move toward him. The only time God will ever get in a hurry is when we repent - when we come to our senses and say, *"Lord, I blew it. I missed it."* God loves the heart of a person who's quick to repent - someone who's quick to turn and say, *"I missed it."*

Zechariah 1:3 NIV84

"Therefore tell the people: This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'Return to me,' declares the LORD Almighty, 'and I will return to you,' says the LORD Almighty."

James 4:8 ESV

"Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you."

When we make a move, he makes a move back. He *responds*. He *reciprocates*. That's a covenant statement. All God is waiting for is for us to make the first move and to turn to him - *to repent*. Psalm 32:5 says, *"Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD' - and you forgave the guilt of my sin."* He didn't hide. He didn't run away. He didn't try to cover it. When we're in prodigal places, we're in sin. When we're in sin, we've lost our mind, we've lost our way, we've lost the peace of God that passes all understanding, and we've lost the joy of the Lord. In his presence is fullness of joy, and we've lost that.

But God is a good Father waiting on a porch looking for us from a long way off and he's saying, *"Please come home. Wake up. Please come back."* Love does what dignity *won't*. God meets us on the road ...He meets us there.

Prayer

Father, thank You for this amazing story. Holy Spirit, we're asking that You would breathe on everything we've heard to see that our prodigals awaken, they come alive, and they turn to come home. Father, we pray for the prodigals in our families to come to their senses, and we pray, Father, that nothing will hinder them from returning. As we patiently wait for them, we persistently pray for them, in faith believing, that Your heart is for their homecoming and that You are moving heaven and earth to make it happen. We love You and honor You. In Jesus' name. Amen