

Luke 15:11-32(NIV) ¹¹Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them. ¹³“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. ¹⁴After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. ¹⁷“When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.’ ²⁰So 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. ²¹“The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. ²²“But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate. ²⁵“Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸“The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’ ³¹“‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Tuesday after a long conversation with a close family member on the west coast I had the strongest of inner promptings to write a sermon on the prodigal son. I felt it so deeply that I called my wife and told her I am not coming home for dinner because I need to follow the leading of that inner prompting from God. She understood. I also called the council president to be excused from a church meeting. To say the least I have a sense of urgency in what I am about to preach.

No one group of people affect us more than our immediate family. God selects your parents for you, whether biological or adoptive. Your relationship with your parents is your first

relationship that occurs, and the home becomes your first church, hospital, school, and first government. Michael Best, who ministers at the Moody Church and has preached here, said to me yesterday. "Aria is 9 months old." "You think you could never love your child more than you do until you see her the next morning, and you love her even more." The love that I feel for our four children is a love that I cannot describe, and I am a person of many words as you well know. It is a love that keeps getting deeper and deeper the older the children become. A dear friend once said, "You would die for your wife, but you would kill for your children." I am not saying we ought to kill anyone, but you do get the point.

In the book of First Samuel, Hannah could not have children before Samuel was born. She was barren. Her husband said to her, "Hannah, am I not worth more to you than ten sons" (1 Sam 1:8)? The Bible does not give her answer but I can take a guess at what she thought. "Of course not." For some, not being able to bear a child is the most painful circumstance in life. Hannah wanted to have children.

I cannot say this enough. A mother's love for her children is one of the most special of loves ever. So many mothers have an intuitive side that they can read their children's needs even before they are spoken. Once the umbilical cord is cut, it is like there is an invisible umbilical cord between mother and child that can never be severed even if there is a break in the relationship. That link between mother and child is unbreakable. We as men did not carry that child or children for 9 months. Us Dad's had all the fun and the women carries the child. A mother begins a relationship with the child and senses there is a new life inside of her, a miracle of God. I find it interesting when watching college football, the first thing an athlete will say on T.V., "Hi Mom." I have never heard, "Hi Dad."

In our parable today of the wayward son, a mother is not mentioned. I am reading between the lines. I think the mother is not mentioned because she was no longer alive. There are two brothers. The younger brother decides he wants to leave the farm and leave for good.

He insults his Dad by asking him to receive his inheritance, long before the father is in the grave. The son had no intention at all of returning. To ask prematurely for your inheritance is to subtly say to your parent, "I no longer want to have a relationship with you." "I want what I deserve before you die." "I do not want to wait for you to die so I can finally get out of here." What he is really saying to his father is this, "I wish you were dead."

The father grants the younger son his request. I think the heart of the father was broken by this request. I also think he was a single father doing his best to make up for the love of two parents. He had lost his wife and now he was about to lose his son forever. Double grief is awful.

The son goes off with a mule pulling the U-Haul trailer with all of his belongings and inheritance money. I can see the father watching the son leave, tears coming down his face. He watched until he could see him no longer. One thinks your heart can only be broken so much until it comes to your children. His heart was torn asunder.

A moment for a personal note. I can still see my parents waving to me as I flew off to Boston for seminary. They were proud but they were sad to see leave. I was very close to my parents. We were on good terms and those were healthy tears. The tears of the father in our story were tears of pain, anguish, and maybe even a little guilt. "What have I done that has made my son reject me." Cries of rejection are some of the deepest cries ever made. No one impacts the lives of parents more than the children. And I think a single Dad all the more. "Maybe if my wife had lived, he would have stayed." He is now feeling the double loss. I have seen Dad's age 10 years over night over the loss of a child. This man's son was lost.

The father granted the son his inheritance. It is as if the son spit in the father's face and the father overlooks all the wrongs. Friends, there are ways and times that you and I spit in the Father's face. God has richly provided for us, everything we need, and yet we always want

more. "Father God, I know I have a great inheritance in heaven but I want some of that now." "Father God, you owe me now what I want." "Father God I deserve better from you now."

We spit in God's face by ignoring the riches we already have in Christ. By neglecting the reading of Scripture, choosing not to worship God on Saturday nights or Sunday mornings. When we spurn Christian fellowship let alone failing to be silent before God and enjoy the Presence of God. We spit in God's face. At times our actions break God's heart and yet God still loves us and will never ever ever take his eyes off of us this side of heaven. He sees us even when we are running away from God. You can never get away from God for God is everywhere.

Parents, God sees your broken heart. The Father knows of your pain more than you do. God is all knowing. God sees exactly where your child is, and you have no idea where that is. God loves your child more than you do. God is being very patient with your child who is away. God is giving the child time to repent. And if the child refuses to repent, God has his ways of bringing that child to his or her senses. Repentance is the goal. The Bible says it is an act of God's kindness that leads to repentance.

The son with the mule and trailer moves away to a distant land where he knows no one and no one knows him. He is too far away for anyone from home to find him. He is thrilled to be on his own and answerable to no one but himself. He is finally away from his father who always tries to control his life. Now the son is in control of his own life. He can do whatever he wants, whenever he wants, and with whomever he wants. He is finally free to be himself without any of those boundaries his father was always espousing. He blames his father's preaching for him wanting to leave and never return.

Free at last. Free at last. Thank God I am free at last. The bad news is with freedom comes a responsibility of its own. Without anyone to answer to, you can fall down hard with no one there to help you back up. Without the responsibilities of work your play becomes your

work. Your entertainment is what you live for. Let's eat, drink, and be merry, and let's not think about tomorrow. Tomorrow will take care of itself.

Yes, the son has the time of his life. I compare it to living in a casino in Las Vegas or New York, or New Jersey or anywhere far away from home. You can have all the wine, women, song, and everything you ever wanted without anyone saying no to you. Yes, he absolutely lived it up. The corks were popping, the money was endless, and the women were. Oops, I better not say that.

Friends, I know that God will only let his children fall so far and then God steps in. Sometimes people have to hit rock bottom before they see how far they have fallen. Sometimes they have to see that if they have their own way all the time, it can lead to disaster. And disaster it did.

The son ran out of money. With no money the friends were no more. The casino lifestyle came to a crashing halt and he had no where to stay. Worse than being homeless, he had no food to eat. Homeless and hungry and hopeless, he took a job feeding pigs. There was no lower work in the life of a Jew than to feed unclean pigs. It was as low as anyone could be. No one gave him food, so he ate the pods that were the pig's food. He was in the pit of pig pen. Some of you might know how bad pig manure smells. Cow manure smells like perfume compared to pig manure and when it comes to manure I know exactly what I am talking about. Chicken manure has flown from the manure spreader into my mouth. I slowed down the tractor as the wind caught the manure in the air and with my mouth wide open I turned around to see what was happening. Guess what flew right into my mouth. I can already hear your jokes.

The one phrase that interrupts the entire passage is this. *"And when he came to his senses"* (vr.17) Another translation states it this way, *"And when he came to himself."* That one phrase is a miracle of God. God is the best interrupter ever. God can interrupt a downhill spiral just like that. That one phrase proves that God never let go of this child. In today's language it

goes like this. "He hit rock bottom and he knew it." He came to his senses. He realized how far he had fallen by finding himself in a pig pen, eating the pig's food, hardly even noticing the stench of pig manure because he lived in it. He went from reveling in a casino to reveling in pig manure. You really cannot fall much further.

Friends, God will only put up with our sin for a time and then God's says, "No more." God stops you in your tracks. This is the time the child needs your prayers more than ever. The incredible guilt, shame, and embarrassment is enough to do a person in. God's kindness comes to this young man. Instead of burying himself in his own rebellion he has a complete change of heart. It is God's kindness, a supernatural act of God in his life that caused him to change his mind and direction of life. He began to feel the love of his father that he had chosen to spurn.

¹⁷"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' ²⁰So he got up and went to his father.

The Bible does not tell us this, but I firmly believe the father never stopped praying for his son. I know the father never stopped loving his son. A day did not go by that the father did not have the pain in his heart of his long, lost, son.

Please listen to this. The Bible says, "*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 father never stopped loving his son. No one had hurt the father more than the son but that love from the father never ceased. The father looked every day way down the road, along way off. Maybe today he will return. Each day the pain grew from his absence.

“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.”

God will always accept you back. No matter how far you fall away from God and God's ways, His eyes are on you and His arms are open wide to receive you, to love you, to care for you and of course to forgive you. The father had already forgiven him before the son returned. It could be God set it up that the father had to forgive the son first before God's kindness led to the son's repentance. One person's obedience unto God opens the door for blessings upon others.

The son had prepared his speech well, but the speech was not necessary. The speech got caught short because the father threw a party for his sons return. God's love brought them together as father and son. *²⁴For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.*

I close with these thoughts. When the son found himself in the lowest of pits, that is a dangerous place to be. This is when the wayward child needs the most prayers for God's kindness to bail them out. It is God's love, grace, mercy, and yes forgiveness that changes one's heart. You can pray, “Lord help my child to hit rock bottom so he or she can look up to You and be restored.”

Secondly, when the son returns the father lavishes him with unconditional love. The father does not tell his son how much he hurt him by leaving. The father does not shame the son by telling him how stupid he was to leave the way he did. The father could have lectured him for hours telling him how sinful he was and how disappointed he was with him. Some people wrongly think the best way to help a wayward child is to criticize them to death even if the criticisms are well deserved. Dividers do not help bring healing. It is Gods love that heals all wounds, not shaming and blaming. Pointing out all the mistakes just makes the child want to leave again and maybe never return.

The son that had never left his father or disobeyed his father was fit to be tied. He did not like the fact that the brother returned especially since he had squandered the inheritance that the family had worked so hard to achieve. The brother was filled with anger and indignation. The return of the wayward son immediately put a huge barrier between the father and the son who had stayed obedient. He felt as dishonored in as much as the father honored the wayward son.

³⁰But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him! ³¹“My son,” the father said, “you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”

The father had already forgiven the wayward son. The sibling only held an unforgiving grudge. It was hardest on the sibling when the prodigal returned.

God the Father’s heart aches for children who have gone their own way. God’s kindness leads to repentance, but this often does not occur until the bottom drops out. Never give up hope for the relationship to be restored. And when the child comes back into your life, give to them what they need the most, God’s unconditional love. Leave your critical spirit elsewhere. It will do irreparable damage. God’s unconditional love heals what our sins have broken. Amen and Amen.