



SERMON NOTES & STUDY GUIDE • 3/5/17

PRODIGAL

THE GOD OF UNRESTRAINED GRACE

Our new Lenten Series, **Prodigal: The God of Unrestrained Grace**. This series centers on the Parable of the Prodigal Son, found in Luke 15. The series will carry us throughout the Lenten season, including Easter Sunday, as we look at this parable and its themes of grace and forgiveness. The series dovetails with our Lenten Art Exhibition, "A Father & His Two Sons: The Art of Forgiveness," which includes 43 pieces by artists including Rembrandt, J.J. Tissot, and Thomas Hart Benton that were inspired by the Parable of the Prodigal Son. We encourage you to visit the exhibition and meditate on this powerful parable as we consider the story from the perspective of the father and both of his sons.

THE PURSUING GOD • Luke 15:1-10 • Tim McConnell • March 5, 2017

Well, this is exciting. We enter a seven-week adventure today in just one chapter of Scripture, Luke 15. Found in that chapter is a parable of Jesus, a story Jesus told, called the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Not only do we get to have it before us in text, but we get to have it all around us on the walls in beautiful and striking artwork. Now what's a 'parable'? It's a little different from a story, a little different from an illustration; a parable is a story with a point. It's a story that supports a larger argument or illustrates what the speaker is trying to teach. But Jesus' parables are more than that. Jesus' parables are stories that reveal the Kingdom of God. They usually turn the world and its values on its head. They often leave us with a lot of questions, but they never fail to reveal something of the nature and character of God. Today we learn about the God who loves and waits and pursues the lost, until they make it home.

We had a Golden Retriever when I was a kid named Lad. Lad was a good-looking animal, but was, sadly, an idiot among dogs. He was a "mimbo"—or for dogs, a "dimbo." He had his looks, but the rest was the obvious product of generations of aggressive in-breeding. Whenever a storm blew through with lightning—which around here is a lot—Lad went berserk chewing everything he could find, trying to dig his way under the house through the carpet, clawing doors...he even broke a pane glass window trying to gnaw his way out. And he ran away. He ran away constantly. An enduring memory from my childhood is evenings spent driving around town with the windows down calling out "Lad! Lad!" People must have thought we were nuts. We were nuts! I remember a few times we realized he was gone, and we kind of debated whether to get in the car. "We could just let him go. He obviously doesn't want to live here!" But then we'd think about him out there, lost, alone in the world, dumb. And off we would go. Lad was a companion to us—and as silly as he was, we would never let him stay lost. Today we see, God is just like that. Do you know anybody that's lost? Do you see anyone in the world that seems outmatched, confused, overcome? Are you here this morning wondering how to get home? God pursues the lost.

Luke 15 begins with a very critical piece of introductory information. In fact, if you miss this you will fail to grasp what follows. It's the audience Jesus is addressing. Look at verses 1-2: "Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.'"

(Luke 15:1-2) Okay, so who was there? This is a great mix! A rare mix! We get four groups in two categories. First "the tax-collectors and sinners." I love how they need be separated. "Sinners" was used to sum up any group that was not cutting it according to the religious community moral standards. It could be all kinds of things. "Tax-collectors" is very specific. When Rome conquered a land they sold rights to collect taxes. Tax-collectors had to pay Rome a certain amount each period, but could collect as much as they wanted—or could coerce. So they were the lowest. It wasn't that tax-collectors didn't want to be lumped in with the sinners. It was the other way around! "Hey, I may be a sinner, but I'm no tax-collector!" Then you have the high-religious. Pharisees and teachers of the law. They're not all that different—just two ways of being holier-than-thou. The "do-rights" and the "know-it-alls." But Jesus has them all mixed up together. He's addressing them all. Somehow, they all want to hear from Jesus. They all need to hear Jesus.

But, verse 2, "But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.'"

(Luke 15:2) They muttered, they murmured, they grumbled. This isn't right. They weren't offended that Jesus would talk to sinners. What makes them upset is that the sinners and tax-collectors come in, and Jesus mixes with them, and eats with them. That's the offense. Jesus does life with people whose moral character is...beyond questionable, it's terrible! "Don't you know, Rabbi, you can talk to such people but you can't talk *with* such people. You can climb up a high moral tower and shout down at such people, but this?" Jesus receives them. Jesus eats with them—eating with someone is even more intimate, even more affirming, than allowing them to be around you. So they hate it. Now the stage is set. Jesus, in this context, with the high-religious and powerful watching him receive and love and welcome and affirm the lowly and unclean and immoral, Jesus tells three stories. The third one is the Prodigal, but today we see the first two.

Jesus tells the story of the lost sheep. A man has a hundred; one wanders off, and Jesus says, "Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine and go find it?" Or, better translated: "What man among you would not" leave the ninety-nine to seek and save the one? The Pharisees are already challenged here because they considered shepherding an unclean, lowly profession. Shepherds were "people of the land," keeping animals, dirty, isolated, odd. None of them knew what

to do with ten sheep, let alone one-hundred. But Jesus makes the point, doesn't he? A good shepherd seeks the lost one and brings it home. Or what woman losing a coin (it's about a day's wage) doesn't light a lamp and search until she finds it? The lost are pursued until they come home. And Jesus makes the meaning of these parables both clear, doesn't he? At the end of each: "I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent." (Luke 15:7) and "In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." (Luke 15:10) It's not about coins and sheep. It's about people coming home to God. This one is special to me. When I gave my life to Jesus Christ at a Young Life camp, my volunteer Young Life leader opened his Bible to this verse and said to me with tears in his eyes, "Tim, you can't hear it, but angels are singing in heaven right now because tonight you came home to God."

So, let's pin this down as the first point. Before I start stirring up the subtext, let's have the main thing be the main thing. The shepherd finds the sheep and brings it home, the woman finds the coin, and then—did you see this?—they party! He calls his friends and neighbors, come rejoice with me. She calls her friends and neighbors, come on and let's party! Now, that phrase "friends and neighbors" isn't on accident either. When God does something in your life, do you neighbors know about it? Or just your friends? But back to the main thing. The main thing is this: Jesus wants the righteous to celebrate when the lost are saved and redeemed. We don't grumble; we don't murmur; we don't mutter about it—oh, no, not another one of those. Jesus wants us joyful at the repentance of sinners. Jesus wants us happy when the lost get home—he wants us to *want* to see it, to long to see the lost get found! And let's make this note too: the rejoicing is not over the welcome, but the repentance. Yes, Jesus welcomes with open arms, but he also calls us from wherever we are to stop our disobedient, contrary, resistant spirit and turn around and come home. "Repent" means "turn around." The angels sing because the lost is found. The lost is found not when he or she is welcomed, but when he or she turns and is saved. The sheep stops fleeing and allows the grasp of the saving shepherd; the coin stops slipping deeper into the dark cracks in the floor and is gripped and lifted by the woman. The celebration follows the salvation, when a sinner repents, turns around, and is brought home.

Okay, that's the main thing. Now let's go deeper. Are these parables good advice? Jesus says to the group - What man among you would not leave the ninety-nine in the unprotected wilderness and go after the one? I think they must of each thought, "Probably me! That sounds like a really dumb idea." Which one of you would not burn midnight oil to find a coin? "Not me! I'd wait for sunlight! It will turn up. You know it's in the house." My brother is a financial advisor—I don't think he would advise either one of these plans. Risk ninety-nine to possibly regain one? Burn oil in unnecessary haste? These parables are not strategic advice. Sometimes as a Christian leader I get this parable turned against me. "Jesus left the ninety-nine to go get one. You should respond to my personal agenda, my preferences." This is not a ministry strategy. First of all, Jesus didn't do that; he told a story about it. Secondly, every time we read about healthy leadership of the church in the Bible we are told to shepherd the whole flock, not hold the mission hostage to one person's issues.

The point is this: these are not strategies, they are parables. Pastors and scholars have bent themselves into pretzels trying to make these actions make sense, but they don't. Even if you could come up with a scheme where burning oil to find the coin made sense, or risking the flock to save the one made sense, then at the end they each throw a party blowing whatever gains may have been made! Not a strategy. A parable. To reveal the nature of God. God is a God who pursues, and he doesn't balk at the risk and he doesn't freeze up at the cost. As soon as God knows his children are lost and in danger, God goes in active and passionate pursuit. Think of the Fall in Genesis. Adam and Eve disobeyed and shut themselves out from God and hid behind the trees. God showed up calling out, "Where are you?" God pursues.

Remember the shepherd? Why a shepherd? Why not something the group could relate to better? Jesus is leaning on a long tradition in Scripture of God as our good shepherd. Psalm 23 ("The Lord is my shepherd"), Jeremiah 23, Isaiah 40, or this text from Ezekiel: "For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them... I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered." (Ezekiel 34:11-12) Jesus is saying, have you forgotten the heart of God? God is a rescuing shepherd. My ministry, says Jesus, is a shepherd who rescues. Jesus is saying, I am the Messiah; I am showing you the heart of God; I am God, and I am here to rescue, to seek and to save. But when the sheep is

found, that's only the beginning. The shepherd lifts the sheep, lays it on his shoulders, and carries it home. If you can imagine the rocky hills and gullies, you start to get the picture. The finding is just the beginning. There is a burden, a heavy burden to bear across the shoulders. Jesus is that shepherd. Jesus is willing to carry that burden. Jesus bore that burden on the cross for you and me, to carry us home.

We have four kids, which is officially a big family. In big families kids have to survive using the herd instinct. You're past man-to-man; the zone has to work. One of my boys, I won't say who, had trouble sticking with the pack when he was little. He had a tendency to pay no attention to where we were all going and kind of fall behind or wander off. Well, one day, I, Superdad, decided I would fix that. We were in a Bass Pro Shops trying to get some gear and get out of there fast, and my little boy was falling behind. I decided not to corral him, but to keep going and let him sweat it out a little. We went around a turn, and I knew my boy wasn't with us. I watched, expecting him to get scared and come running around the corner to meet us. He didn't. I stopped and watched a little more. He didn't come. I went back and looked down the aisle where he had been, and he was gone. And he was four. My heart dropped out of my socks. Immediately I went into combat mode. Seal the doors; shut off the elevators; I want access to the security cameras; set a two-mile perimeter around this building. As soon as I thought my son might be lost, I snapped into full-bore, adrenaline-powered rescue mode. It took me five minutes to find my boy. Five minutes that felt like five hours. And when I had him in my hands, I got down on my knees and looked him in the eye, and I didn't care that he had wandered, I only wanted him to know one thing—"Your dad loves you, and if you are ever lost, and if you are ever confused, and if you are ever in the dark, just know this: I'm coming to get you wherever you are. ...Also, don't tell Mom."

This is the love of God met in the face of Jesus Christ. Where are you? Far from God? God is a God who pursues. God is not assessing the risk, God is not blocked by the cost, God is not scared of the burden. God is in pursuit coming to find you where you are and bring you home. This is the love of the God who pursues.

STUDY GUIDE

"Prodigal: The Pursuing God"

Luke 15:1-10

Start It

- Have you ever spent more to recover something than what it was worth? I once found a pair of pants for \$10 on a bargain table. I loved them. But it cost me \$18 to have them hemmed and tailored! Some things are worth saving, no matter the cost.

Study It

- What is a parable? What significant parables of Jesus can you recall?
- Read Luke 15:1-2. Who is in the room? Classify all four of the different groups listening to Jesus. What is each of these groups listening for? What do they expect to hear? Why do the Pharisees grumble?
- Read Luke 15:3-7. What is the main point? Does it seem risky to leave ninety-nine in the wilderness for the sake of one? What does that tell you about God?
- Read Luke 15:8-10. What is the main point? Does it seem silly to burn oil to recover the coin quickly? What do you think Jesus wants us to understand about urgency and God's heart for the lost?
- When each of the imaginary figures finds what was lost, how do they react? Whom do they invite to join them in celebration? (Any significance there?) How do the angels in heaven react when a sinner repents?

Pray It

Merciful and Holy God, when we are lost You seek us, when we are trapped You release us, when we are confused and far from home You send Your light to find us. Thank you, most Holy Father, for loving us when we are most unlovable, and for always bringing us home. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Live It

If God is a pursuing God, think of one way you can pursue someone who needs God's love this week.