

SERMON NOTES & STUDY GUIDE • 3/19/17



# PRODIGAL

## THE GOD OF UNRESTRAINED GRACE

Our new Lenten Series, **Prodigal: The God of Unrestrained Grace**, 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.

## RETURN • Luke 15:17-24 • Tim McConnell • March 19, 2017

How many of you live on a hill? We live in Colorado – we all live on hills! When you live on a hill and you go out for a walk, you make a decision – down the hill or up the hill. If you go down the hill, you know, however far you go down you have to climb back up at the end. That's especially true on bicycles. In July we took a family walk around our new neighborhood. We were walking and talking, and I could see the clouds getting darker. But I was invested. I wasn't willing to turn around. Then the storm came suddenly. The wind, then the rain, then the thunder, then the lightning. Should we duck under something? No! Run for home! Finally it's me with Liam on my back, all of us in full sprint getting soaked, trying to get home before we are struck by lightning and turned into bacon bits. We walk a lot as a family. Liam always looks at the clouds on the way out! Getting home can be the hardest part.

We left our hero last week in the pig pen. Actually he's not the hero, the hero is the father—or the hero is God if you really want to go there. But anyway, here he sits in the product of his disobedience, in the fruit of his rebellion – a Jewish man far from Jerusalem, penniless, hopeless, feeding pigs in a distant country. He needs to get home. It's not going to be easy.

Have you ever felt like it's all up to you to get home to God? Have you ever felt that? It's up to me to fix this problem, get out of this hole, make up for my mistakes, and get home. It's all up to me. Have you ever felt like it's all up to you to decide to make yourself Christian, like becoming Christian is this choice of lifestyle and I need to decide to be holy and change myself into this new thing. Here's the thing I want you to know – coming home to God is not a self-make-over. It's not about making yourself into a new thing. Home is where you belong. Holy is who you are.

How did we get here? Remember last week, the rebellion. Can you imagine being around that kitchen table? "Hey Dad, hey bro, we need to talk." "What is it, son?" "When you die I get an inheritance, right?" "Well, yeah." "Give it." "What do you mean? Are you in trouble?" "I want out. I'm leaving." "Where will you go?" "Away. I hate you. I'm leaving." "I'm just going to take a shot here, but I bet some of you know all too well how that moment feels. How do you respond? I think I'd smack the kid. The father splits the farm, holds a fire sale of the estate. Imagine the conversations with neighbors. "What's going on?" "Selling it all. My son...he's leaving me." The shame and the sacrifice. Now, I need to say again, this is not advice,

not a strategy; it's a parable. It is very difficult to find the wise and loving path when dealing with a disobedient child, but in this story, the father sacrifices and allows it. And you know we live in a culture right now that would celebrate the son. "How brave! How bold! Don't let that father rule your life. You get yours!" All the actors presenting Oscars would love that story. So off he goes. We go with him, don't we? We run from God when we don't believe he has our best interest at heart. "You don't know what I need, God. I'm out." Off to the far country. But home is where you belong. Holy is who you are.

When you are in the far country, you try to satisfy yourself. You try to make yourself something – to prove yourself a success, worthy of love, valued. He wants to feel important. "Sure, you can feel important. Just put your money on the table; you'll be the most important guy here." He wants to feel loved. "Oh, you can feel loved; just put your money on the table." He wants to know friendship. "I'll be your friend, I'll be your best friend...just put the money on the table." So long as we have resources to impress we can feel good. But he reaches into his pocket after a while, and there's nothing left. I have nothing left. I've spent it. I have nothing left to impress you, to ingratiate myself to you, to turn your head, your heart, toward me. Jesus makes this painful note in verse 16, "no one gave him anything." I thought we were friends! None of it was real. He spent all he had, but it wasn't real. It wasn't real love, it wasn't real laughter, it wasn't real friendship...it wasn't real. It was a transaction for a feeling—that's it.

How long do we spend in the far country before we turn for home? And you know I'm not talking geography here, I'm talking about being at home with God and being in genuine community. How long? Verse 16: "He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything." (Luke 15:16). Do you know what that means? He was feeding pigs "pods" and we think Jesus probably means the seed pods of a carob tree or something like that. Something pigs can eat and digest, but humans can't. So, do you get it? He looks at the pigs, and he's so low, he's so far gone, he looks at the pigs then suddenly realizes he wishes he was one. He wishes he was one. How long will you wallow with the pigs? There's a poetic lyric in a song I like, "We are swimming with the snakes at the bottom of the well; So silent and peaceful in the darkness where we fell; But we are not snakes and what's more we never will be; If we stay swimming here forever we will never be

free.” (Patty Griffin, *Forgiveness*) We are not snakes. We are not pigs. How long will you sit in the dark of the well, how long will you wallow in the mud with the pigs? That’s not you. “So brave. So bold.” No. That’s not real. Every attempt, every inclination you have had to go find yourself apart from God—it’s false. It’s not real. It’s not who you are. Home is where you belong. Holy is who you are.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, you see, he remembers. I’m not a pig. I’m not a snake. I’m a son. I am my father’s son. Somewhere in his conscious or subconscious mind, there is a voice. “My child. My son. My daughter. Come home.” So we get this moment in verse 17, this profound moment—it sounds like something out of Socrates or Plato. It was enough, just the phrase, to inspire Soren Kierkegaard to come up with the philosophy of Existentialism – verse 17, “When he came to his senses.” Or closer to the Greek, “When he came to himself.” What distance is there between who you are trying to be today and who you actually are? He came to himself. I’m not a pig. I’m not a snake. I’m a son. He realized his true self. I will arise and go to my father.

I was watching *The Voice* last week – great show. We love watching that one together as a family. You get these little background snippets of the performers’ lives before they sing. One of them had an interview with the singer’s dad. The dad said, “Well, he went through this punk rock phase.” They showed pictures of the punk rock phase. “And his mom and I would hear him in the garage with the band just screaming his head off, shrieking and making the most awful noises. Eventually, I said to him, Son, I’m not sure what you are trying to be—but that just ain’t you!” The singer came out with this crooning country song the judges loved! I’m still not sure that’s him, but he’s on the right track!

So, the return: “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.’ So he got up and went to his father.” (Luke 15:17-20) Was it genuine? Was it a ploy? It’s hard to read his heart at this part of the story, but it seems like he has a plan in mind to work his way back into the father’s good favor. He’s not quite ready to throw himself on the mercy of the father, and just be received. “I still have something to offer, I can work off my debt, prove my value. It will take a long

time, but I’ll do it.” He memorizes a speech.

Ever feel like it’s all up to you to make yourself a Christian? It’s all up to you to get home from where you are and get back to God? Let me tell you the truth—you don’t have the shoe leather left to walk your way back to God. It just isn’t about you working your way back into God’s favor. I love the signature work in this collection, Edward Riojas, “The Prodigal Son.” Do you see what’s on his shoulder, kind of pecking him along from behind? It’s a dove. A white dove. It’s the Holy Spirit. No matter how far you are from God, he’s right behind you. And he can get you home. He can give you the strength to walk. He can lift you up out of the dark well, out of the muddy pig pen, all the way home. Home is where you belong. Holy is who you are. Don’t run away from God to find your truth. He is your truth. He is your life. He is your way and your salvation. You can’t get home to God from where you are. But you can be carried by the Lord, if you are willing to be saved. C. S. Lewis wrote once, “Progress means getting nearer to the place you want to be. And if you have taken a wrong turn, then to go forward does not get you any nearer. If you are on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road; and in that case the man who turns back soonest is the most progressive man.” (*Mere Christianity*) If you’re on the wrong train, it doesn’t do any good to walk back down the aisle from car to car. You have to get off that train. Turn around. Get off the train. Turn back to God.

And what happens? Maybe this is the most moving moment in the whole story. The father is waiting and watching—“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.’ 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. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.” (Luke 15:20-24) Turn to the Father, turn to God and you will see He has already turned to you, in fact, He never turned away. His love is for you. His heart longs to see you home. See the father running toward the lost son—that’s God running toward you with love and grace. The speech he prepared, the plans he had to make it all right, the words don’t even fall from

his lips. You're home! You're home! I have you! That's that all that matters! You're home. Angels are singing in heaven. God is smiling and rejoicing over you in love. Home is where you belong. Holy is who you are. Now, now, you are free. Let's celebrate!

Ever feel like it's up to you to make yourself Christian – like going to the gym, like learning a language? I'm going to be a Latin scholar—can't tell you how many times I've told myself that...and you know what? I'm no Latin scholar! I'm going to make myself Christian – that's what we think. And it feels about as out of range as reading Latin. We look to the mature Christian disciples among us the way an addict looks at the twenty-years sober. We want to ask, "How? How did you get there? What power did you find in yourself?" And we don't believe them when they turn and tell us, "It was no power of mine. Day by day, step by step I gave myself over to the power of the Lord, my Savior Jesus Christ. He carried me home."

Here's the deal. You need to turn your heart, you need to resolve to turn around and meet Jesus and stop the rebellion and begin the return...but you don't need to make yourself anything. Home is where you belong. Holy—meaning saved, forgiven, redeemed; not perfect, but made holy by the sacrifice of Jesus—Holy is who you are. Stop trying to find yourself apart from God in all these false promises. God loves you and wants what's best for you. Turn to Him and you will find He has already brought you home. You belong at home with Him, in His love.

This morning all I want you to do is to see the Father's open arms running toward you. See His open arms. Feel the love of God's welcome. You are welcome here. You belong here. See the open arms; feel the love of embrace. Taste the feast prepared for you. Get home. Hear the music. Join the dance to the song of salvation. Home is where you belong. Holy is who you are. Accept the embrace. Walk into the welcome. Lean into the love. You are home.

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## STUDY GUIDE

### "Prodigal: Return"

#### Luke 15:17-24

#### Start It

- It is hard to admit when you are wrong. Imagine investing your life in something and having to walk away from it. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor who realized his church had given in and was getting carried away by Naziism. It came down to Christianity versus Germanism. It was hard for him to turn around, but he said, "If you board the wrong train it is no use running along the corridor in the opposite direction" (E. Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, p. 176). Sometimes, whether because of our own disobedience or the disobedience of those around us, we have to get off the train we are on and find our way back home.

#### Study It

- Read Luke 15:11-16. What did the younger son do with his money? What was he trying to gain? Do you think the famine is significant in the story? Why is it important that the young man "hired himself out"? Is the young man free for having left his father's household?
- Leviticus 11:7-8 says pigs are unclean for Jews. What is Jesus trying to teach us when we see the young man stuck feeding pigs, and even wanting to eat what they eat?
- Read Luke 15:17-19. What is the younger son's plan? What do you think he expects to have happen when he returns?
- Read Luke 15:20-24. Some in the town would have felt obligated to meet the disobedient son at the gates and beat him or even stone him to death. What does the father do when he sees his son? What cost does the father pay to do this act?
- Are you quick or slow to return to the Lord when you find yourself "in the far country"?

#### Pray It

*Heavenly Father, in Your limitless love and fathomless mercy, You wait and watch for me when I wander from You. As I grow in faith and maturity, make me quick to turn for home, make me eager to be under Your care in Your household, and grant that I may feel Your loving embrace. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

#### Live It

Find one habit of your heart that pulls you away from God.