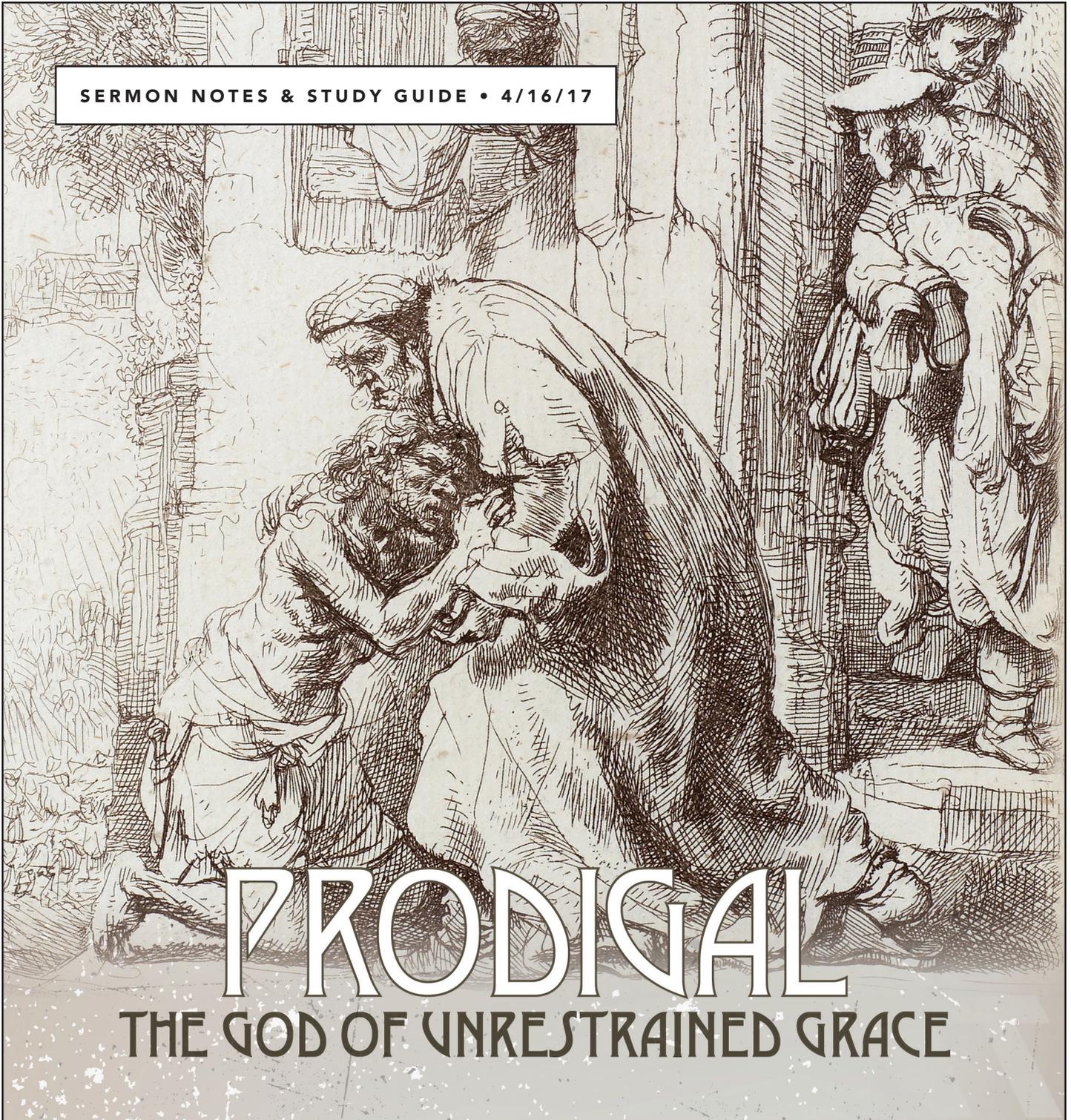


SERMON NOTES & STUDY GUIDE • 4/16/17



# 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.

## THE UNSTOPPABLE FEAST • Luke 15:17-24 • Tim McConnell • April 16, 2017

Happy Easter! It's been our privilege to host some pretty special artwork this month, all around this story Jesus told: the Parable of the Prodigal Son. I even contributed a piece. Here it is. (Rembrandt etching shown). No, that's Rembrandt. But I did make one. (Stick figure drawing is shown). I think you're missing the power of the perspective... Well, put anything under a nice enough frame and it looks valuable. I'll have to get a pretty nice frame.

With art you have to watch out for forgery. The world is full of fake Rembrandts. But you know what, that Rembrandt in the hall is no fake. It's real! What we celebrate today is real. Jesus is real. Jesus really came. Jesus really died. Jesus really rose from the dead. Everyone surrounding the death and resurrection of Jesus believed they saw Him again after He had very publicly died. It wasn't a dream; it was an event. They saw the empty tomb, and they saw Jesus alive after He was dead. They didn't wish it. In fact, it was inconvenient for them as they were persecuted and killed. But they came to understand it as the greatest news, for them and for us, because it meant that God accepted the sacrifice made by Jesus His Son on our behalf on the cross. If it's real that Jesus died and rose again, that means we can too. We can be forgiven by God because of Jesus. Jesus lives after death, and so can we by faith in Him. The entire New Testament is based on this. Jesus rose from the dead. Jesus is alive. This is no fake. And He really has plans for your life—to get you to the unstoppable feast.

We might think what happened on Easter morning doesn't have much to do with our lives; you might think that was a nice thing that happened a long time ago, but it doesn't have anything to do with me. But actually, here's the thing, if you get this right—if you truly understand what God did for you through Jesus, by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—if you really get this right, it will give you such peace, such a foundation of peace and joy and eternal life, nothing will ever be the same. I want to help you to see: Jesus rescued us from a life worse than death to turn our death into life. And we're going to learn that in the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

One of Jesus' most famous stories is the Parable of the Prodigal Son. It changed the world. I'm not kidding. This little story inspired more artwork than

any single ancient tale in human history. Fyodor Dostoevsky was inspired to write *The Brothers Karamazov* by this parable. Soren Kierkegaard developed Existentialism thinking about this story. Painters made paintings, poets wrote poems, potters threw pots, musicians made music—all because of this. The Rolling Stones, Iron Maiden, and Kid Rock all have songs called "Prodigal Son"! If Kid Rock got it, there's hope for you and me! So maybe there is something to learn here—something to learn about the love of God and just what He's willing to do to get us home.

Jesus' story goes like this. A father had two sons. The younger one decides to leave. He asks his father to give him what he would one day inherit after his father died – a huge insult. But the father does it. Then the kid goes far away and blows all the money in loose living. When he hits rock bottom he decides to come home, and when he does his father runs and embraces him, and kisses him, and restores him to his place in the family. But his older brother is mad, he feels wronged. The father invites the older brother to come back in to the party and celebrate, but...we don't get the end of the story. We don't know if the older brother ever comes in. We don't know if he can ever get over his anger and welcome his little brother home, and enjoy the love and grace of his father. And that's how we are with God. Which one do you identify with? Are you the young son, demanding what you want and going bankrupt chasing your own desires? Are you the older son, working your fingers to the bone to get what you want, but always coming up short? Or do you see yourself as the father? At some point we are all in a position to be the father to someone, to offer grace and forgiveness when it isn't deserved. Which one are you?

You know the father isn't a victim. The father decides. He decides to give the son the money—he didn't have to. The father decides not to disown his disobedient son. That would have been cleaner, but he decides to keep the door open for his son to come home one day. The father decides to run out to greet his son; out of love, it says, he runs to his son. This was an embarrassing thing to do. He doesn't care. The father decides. He decides to give the robe, the ring, to kill the fattened calf and celebrate. He decides to get up from the banquet and go out to find the older son outside, and beg

him to come in – again an embarrassing thing. But the father decides. I'll do it, I don't care, I'll make the sacrifice, I'll take on the shame...why? Why? Because the father has a goal, he has a vision. In his mind he can see his children at home with him at the party. And he won't allow anything to stop it – even our disobedience. God the Father, will not let anything keep Him from getting us to the unstoppable feast with Him. He has a plan.

I have four kids. I've learned there are two ways to have a birthday party: planned or last minute. And if it's last minute, watch out! One time we got behind the eight ball and had to pull off a last minute party, so we called the bowling alley. "No problem! We'll do it all." We got going and started making all these last minute decisions. We need a cake. They can do the cake. What about the parents? Sure, the parents can bowl—brothers and sisters too. We need drinks, we need pizza, we need balloons and plates and tokens for games... The final bill was \$14,000. Or close to that, as I remember it. From then on we went with planned.

God is the Father who has a plan, a goal in mind. He will stop at nothing, spare no expense to see it through. Easter celebrates that the whole thing has been done. The plan worked. Jesus rescued us from a life worse than death to turn our death into life. Now the party is coming, now the feast is guaranteed, now there is no question for all who follow Him—we are going to the unstoppable feast. How did He do it? I want us to see this morning, as we celebrate the empty tomb on Easter day. I want us to see that this famous story, the Parable of the Prodigal Son, is an Easter story. This is the story of salvation – the story on which all of Christianity is based, the story of Jesus and how He saved our souls. What I want you to see this morning is that Jesus became the younger son for us so we could get home to the Father. He rescued us from a life worse than death and turned our death into life.

Jesus was not a disobedient son, but He became one for us. He followed the tracks of disobedience for us, so we could find our way back home. See how this works? Jesus is the one who left His family, left all He had – not in anger or selfishness, but the opposite. It's Jesus who got up from the right hand of His Father; it's Jesus who, as it says, emptied Himself, made Himself nothing. Jesus who was God, who is God, made Himself nothing to

be one of us. We were lost in the far country like the younger son, running out of resources chasing our foolish desires, running out of time. Jesus went to the far country Far from home. The young son becomes unclean out there. Keeping pigs was unclean. Denying your father like that was a sin—it was unforgiveable in most people's minds. Unforgiveable. Jesus became unclean for us. He took our sin on Himself. He didn't have to. But He did.

Jesus, who is God. Jesus, through whom and for whom all things were made. Jesus made Himself nothing for us, so we, who truly were nothing, could be something through His love. Jesus went to the far country, took our place, became unclean, became the younger son, then turned to face the consequences. He turned to pay the penalty. And the penalty was death. See here's the difference. The kid in the story doesn't really pay what's owed. But that's because Jesus, when He turned to face the consequences of disobedience, Jesus paid it all. He carried our sins to the cross. He was unjustly accused, beaten, humiliated, then hung on a cross of wood to die in the open air. His blood was poured out. He paid it all – for us. Jesus became the younger son on our behalf so we would not have to pay the penalty the younger son owed. Because we couldn't – we couldn't possibly pay it. So He did it on our behalf.

Then His body was taken down off the cross and wrapped up and laid in a cold, dark cave with a giant rock rolled in front to seal it and Roman guards posted to keep mourners away. And He lay there. Dead. But, on Easter morning, life returned. Breath rushed into His lungs in the cold silence of that cave. And Jesus rose again. The power of God blew the stone away and opened the mouth of that cave and Jesus walked out of there, alive! And can't you see the Father in that moment! My Son is back! Jesus came home to His Father having been all the way into the far country, all the way under the earth, all the way into death itself on our behalf. Jesus walked home to his Father God, and God the Father rushed toward Him and threw the robes of eternal glory around Him, and put the ring of victory on His hand, and called on all the heavenly host, ring the bells, light the fires, start the music and prepare the feast—my Son Jesus Christ has done it! Salvation has been won this day, and all who call on His name, from now on all who call on His name, will be welcomed in the feast. Start the music, roast

the meat, angels start singing, cherubim start dancing—the party is on! Jesus, my Son Jesus, took on the death of the whole world and won! Now any who believe in Him can follow Him home, from death to life forever and ever. Amen. Jesus rescued us from a life worse than death and turned our death into life. It's true. It's real. It's true for all of us, any who will believe in Him. I was in Egypt earlier this year with our mission team. We worshipped with small church plants scattered around Cairo. One met Thursday night in a rented part of a car dealership. That one got me. We were told as we drove there in the dark at night that this was an area of Islamic extremism. There were guards at gates. But when worship began, holy cow! It was awesome! So passionate! So pure! I was humbled to preach that church. After we got home one of our team, Steve Hood, was praying and processing. He wrote down his favorite things and prayed, "Jesus, I'm grateful for these things I got to see; these were my favorite things." Then on a whim he kind of turned it around and said, "What about you, Lord? What was your favorite thing?" And Steve heard from the Lord, in that way that you can hear from God, not a voice exactly, but you know it's the Lord. The Lord told him: "Worship. Worship was my favorite. I love when my children feel my love so deeply the world fades away all around them, and they are free." Worship. At home in the arms of the Father. Outside, an angry, violent world...but inside, joy, light, love. A feast.

Jesus rescued us from a life worse than death to turn our death into life, and you can taste that right now. He went there for us. Not by accident – on purpose. He knew we could not get home from where we were. Jesus became the disobedient son so we could live as children of God. This is real. This is no forgery, no fake. Jesus went down into death for you. Jesus rose up to life for you. This is for you. Follow the son back home to the Father. Jesus has beaten a path home from wherever you are. Home to the unstoppable feast of joy. Home to God's eternal embrace. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Amen.

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## STUDY GUIDE

### "Prodigal: The Unstoppable Feast" Luke 15:17-24

#### Start It

- It's Easter. Chocolate bunnies, candy eggs, new spring outfits for kids, and time to plant flowers in the garden. Easter has come to mean a number of things to all of us, just like Christmas. I remember the first Easter after I had truly understood the Gospel and responded to Christ's love in personal prayer at a summer camp. I got up early and rode my bike to the sunrise service. I expected to see Jesus Himself come up over the horizon.

#### Study It

- Read Luke 15:17-24. What would you consider the heart of this parable? What is the most important moment? Pick two or three verses between Luke 15:11-32 without which the entire story would fall apart or mean something different.
- Go back to the beginning of Jesus' parable. How many sacrifices is the father forced to make? Is there any deliberation in him about what to do? Why is the father willing to make all these sacrifices? What goal does he have in mind?
- Be reminded, this is not parenting advice but a parable to reveal the nature of God. Does the father reveal the nature of God? In what way?
- This is Easter Sunday. Jesus came to earth to die for our sins. The Father recognized His sacrifice on our behalf, and the resurrection proves that the atonement made by Jesus was enough. Read Acts 13:26-39. What does the resurrection of Jesus prove?
- The story of Jesus is that He came from His Father to associate with us and pay our debt of sin so that we can come back home. In what way is the life and ministry of Jesus reflected in the story of the younger son?

#### Pray It

*Heavenly Father, You sent Your only-begotten Son to be one with us, to carry our debt of sin to the cross. This morning we celebrate the victorious resurrection of Jesus from the dead. He was not subjected to decay, but was lifted up to new and eternal life and glory. Help us to put our full faith and trust in the name of Jesus Christ our Risen Savior, that we too might follow from life to death to life eternal in Him. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

#### Live It

Help someone else comprehend the glory of Jesus' resurrection in Easter worship.