

TELL ME THE STORIES OF JESUS
“A Story on Fatherhood”
Luke 15

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If I could be anywhere doing anything on Father's Day, I really wish that I could be with my own dad. I did talk with him and told him how much I loved and appreciated him. I am so very thankful for his life, and his influence in my life. My dad has been a great source of joy, blessing, and encouragement to me. I have so many incredible memories with my father.

As this Father's Day has been approaching, I have thought back over a number of those memories. One of the fondest and yet most frustrating memories that I have is of going out with my dad when I was a child. My dad was the kind of person who never went anywhere that he did not meet somebody he knew. He was a talkative fellow and a likable guy. I can remember this so well growing up in Memphis, Tennessee, especially in my earliest years.

Department stores in our community were only open one night a week. This was a major city, but believe it or not, I was living in those days when they were not open throughout the day and night as they are now. I remember going on Thursday evenings to Sears at Poplar Avenue in Memphis, Tennessee. We would be there about 10 minutes shopping, and my dad would spend 30-40 minutes talking to somebody that he knew. For some reason, I just thought back over that time. It would be so exciting to go with my dad! Yet, how frustrated I would be before we left because he was there talking to people! Yet, that was just who he was. That was his personality. He is a people person. He was a consummate salesman. My mom used to always say he could sell fur coats on a tropical island.

One of the most vivid memories in my life was when I was 6 years old, facing my first big crisis. I had to have a tonsillectomy. I remember going to Baptist Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee. I remember so well my dad being in the room with me. He said, "David, I am going to go get you some ice cream. I want you to just stand right here at this window." It was a big, 2,000 bed, high-rise hospital in downtown Memphis. I remember him helping me get into the hospital gown. Then, he told me to just stand at the edge of that window and look down on the street below. He said I would see him in a few minutes as he was going across the street to get the ice cream. One of those fixed memories in my mind as a six-year-old is standing with my face pressed to the window. I remember seeing my dad walking across the street, smiling and waving at me. It was just one of those incredible moments in my life with my dad!

I remember about 6 years later, just as I was approaching my 12th birthday in July. We got into the car one afternoon. He told me we were going to take a picnic so we gathered up some things and left the house. We were driving on the outskirts of Memphis, heading to a place called Lakeland, a large park and lake, to spend the afternoon. I will never forget! As we were driving down Interstate 40, he flew past the Lakeland exit! I said, "Dad, you missed the exit!"

You missed the exit!" He said, "Yes, I did. We will turn around in just a minute." Then, he missed the next exit -- and the next exit. I said, "Dad, what are you doing?" He said, "Well, how would you like to go a little further down the road than Lakeland?" I said, "Well, that will be fine." He said, "Why don't we go towards Nashville?" I said, "Well, Dad, how will we get back?" He said, "Well, I will tell you what. Let's not go to Nashville. Let's just go on to Gatlinburg! Would you like to go to Gatlinburg?" I was a kid! I loved to go to Gatlinburg, Tennessee! It was one of the greatest places! That was the closest thing to heaven that I could remember in my elementary years. I remember saying, "But, Dad, we don't have any clothes!" He said, "Oh, yes, we do." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "The sandwiches are just to eat in the car. I have the rest of our things packed in the truck. We are going to Gatlinburg for a few days."

I will never forget making that journey up there, turning 12 years old in the Twin Islands Motel there on the strip in Gatlinburg. I got up on my 12th birthday and walked outside the little hotel room. There was a brand new rod and reel! I spent the next few days in those cold mountain streams fishing and had an incredible time with my dad. I

have never forgotten that experience!

I remember being 15 years old and learning how to drive with my dad. I will never forget when we were out on a road near Lakeland. We were coming down a little two-lane highway, and I was driving. We were going through a turn, and I guess I was going at a pretty good rate of speed. As I was turning that steering wheel, I guess I was getting really close to the mailboxes on his side of the car. I have never forgotten him reaching over and grabbing the wheel and turning the car. I slammed on the brakes and we stopped. We had a huge argument right there! I was telling him how I was going to miss those mailboxes; he was telling me that he knew more about driving than I did, and that I needed to listen to him. Looking back, I probably would have taken out two or three of those mailboxes that day!

I remember being 19 years old, and Connie and I were dating. We had met one another through the college department at Bellview Baptist Church. I spent a lot of time with her. We were at a stage of life of heavy work and school schedules. She was in nursing school in a program downtown, and I lived and worked in east Memphis. I was also going to school at Memphis State University.

One winter night I went down to see Connie after I got off work about 9:30 in the evening. I picked her up at her dorm and we took a drive to the downtown area of Memphis. (Frankly, this was probably not the best place for two young people to be late at night.) We pulled off the road on a bluff up above the Mississippi River. As we were sitting there that evening, I began to hear little ping sounds on the car and realized it was sleeting. I told her we probably needed to head back to the dorm. I put that little stick shift car in reverse and as I let my foot off the clutch the wheels began to spin. I did not think I would be able to get off this spot where we were sitting. I touched my foot to the brake and the car began to slide forward. The brake was not stopping the car on the ice.

The next couple of seconds were some of the most horrific and frightening seconds in my life. We slid forward over the edge of that bluff. There was a big hole there and the front wheel of the car hit the hole. I thought for sure that I was going to have to call a wrecker to get me out of that hole. Little did I know that when the car hit the hole the back end of the car would turn around and start sliding down the embankment. It came to a gradual stop, not more than a foot and a half from the edge of the icy waters of the Mississippi River.

I remember climbing up the icy embankment that night, hitchhiking down Riverside Drive in Memphis, and calling my dad and saying, "Dad, I am in a ditch." I will never forget his response 30 or 45 minutes later when he finally arrived downtown and saw my car sitting at the edge of the water. It was a "Sanford & Son" moment. He was holding his chest, realizing that we were almost gone. No one would have ever known that we had gone into that water so quickly. I have never forgotten that moment!

At the age of 22, I went to seminary. I was working a lot of hours trying to study and prepare, and trying to spend time in the library. The job I took in those days was throwing papers. Seven days a week I would get up at 3:30 in the morning. I would go out and throw about 350 papers. This job was the one thing that I could do that would allow me my day schedule and my evenings in the library. I remember many mornings being frigid cold. Literally, you would go out, start the car, let it run 10 minutes, and finally scrape about an inch of ice off the top of the car. I would drive up to the pick up, and at 3:45 in the morning I would suddenly see the headlights of my father's car. He would meet me and help me throw those papers, especially on Sundays. He knew that I needed to be teaching a Sunday School class at 8:00 in the morning.

Then, just 2 weeks ago he was here visiting and we were going across 528. I reached in my pocket to get some toll money and he handed me some money for the toll. He then reached over and handed me a \$100 dollar bill and said, "You might need this." I was embarrassed, but that is my dad. That is the kind of person he is. I have had some of the most incredible moments in my life with my dad and I am thankful for it!

In much the same way that I feel about my father, and in much the same way that I have experienced those kinds of incredible moments with my own dad, there is an incredible moment with a father and a son that is recorded in Luke 15. In this chapter we see a parable. A parable is simply a compelling earthly story with a powerful, spiritual truth. Actually, it is one parable, but it has three illustrations in it. Each illustration brings home the same point, but the points intensify in their impact as we see them.

Let me just give you some background. Luke 15:1,

“Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him to hear Him.”

Jesus was drawing a rather unsightly crowd of people. He had the most suspicious, the most stained, the most unlikely type of people who were his supporters. The Bible says in verse 2,

“And the Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, ‘This Man receives sinners and eats with them.’ So He spoke this parable to them...”

Jesus heard the criticism that was going on about Him and about His ministry. So, in order to speak a word of spiritual truth to those Pharisees, and in order to drive home another of the mysteries of the kingdom of God, Jesus told some stories. These stories would help to reveal something of what God, the heavenly Father, was really like and would help to demonstrate what His ministry was all about. In this 15th chapter of Luke, what we find is that it is a chapter full of conflict and anxiety. The conflict and anxiety is over some things that are lost.

The first thing that is presented as lost in Luke 15 is a sheep. The Bible tells us that there was a shepherd who had 99 sheep, but one went away. The shepherd left the rest of the fold and went out searching for the one sheep that he might find it and reclaim it.

The Bible goes on to tell us in the next instance not only of the lost sheep, but of a lost coin. There was a woman who had some coins that were of great value. She lost one of them and literally took everything apart in her house trying to find that lost coin. She finally found it.

Then, the most compelling story of all is the latter portion of this parable where Jesus says there was a man who had a son. The son left his father and his family. It was the prodigal son. The Bible tells us that this son and this father were reunited. What an incredible moment, as you will soon see!

In each case, something of great value was lost. In each case, a search was put on to find and to reclaim what had been lost. In each case, if you will read the parable, you will find that there was great celebration. The Bible says that when the man found his sheep he said in Luke 15:6,

“... ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!’ ”

The Bible tells us again that when the woman found the coin she said in Luke 15:9,

“... ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the piece which I lost!’ ”

Then, in Luke 15:10,

“Likewise, I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

The Bible says the father had a party and said in Luke 15:32,

“It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found.”

What an incredible picture of the faithful Father, of God and of His love for us! Let’s take enough time to read this story, in particular, to look at it and revisit it afresh and again, beginning in Luke 15:11,

“Then He said: ‘A certain man had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the portion of goods that falls to me.’ So he divided to them his livelihood. And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living. But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in that land, and he began to be in want. Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have filled his

stomach with the pods that the swine ate, but no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.' And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' And they began to be merry."

What an incredible picture of the wonder of the love of a father, even for a felled son! As we look at this picture, I want us to take a little bit of time to think through it and walk through it. The Bible tells us, as we read further in this passage, that there are actually two brothers in this home. The other one is just referenced in the opening, talking about the fact that the man had two sons. The one who seems to get all the attention is this younger son, the one who left his family behind.

It is always difficult for parents to have their children leave. My dad told me that when we finally left after seminary and moved away for the very first time, he stood in the driveway watching us. Our station wagon was packed full of goods and a car was being pulled behind it. As we drove off from their house and pulled up the hill, he said he walked to the back door and felt like kicking it in. He knew that when we pulled away that day, we were really gone.

We moved to South Florida in 1983. It was the first major time of separation in our lives. Yet, today, in the world in which we live, that has become a pretty regular theme of life. Most of us, if not many of us in this building this morning, have children who live in other parts of the country or extended family who are scattered all over America and around the world. It really has become a normal part of the maturing process today to see us grow and mature, and launch and leave. Thank God we have things like telephones, faxes, and e mails. We have the ability to see one another. We can get on a jet airplane and be home again within just a matter of a couple of hours from most places if we have opportunity.

Yet, in this day and time, leaving home and journeying away was a much more permanent and painful reality. The Bible describes the location of this son. It said he received the inheritance from his father. He looked at his father and said, [paraphrased] "Give me my portion." The father took a risk. He had the opportunity to simply let those things that he had for his sons remain in trust, and after his death they would then be divided and given to them. Yet, this father was willing to give them a choice, willing to give them an opportunity.

So, the father divided his inheritance among his sons. The Bible says this younger son went to a different location. The Bible describes that location as the far country . What a painful reality! In that day and time, leaving your family and your village was the ultimate expression of rebellion. Today, we have become accustomed to it, yet, in that day and time families lived together. Literally, they just built new rooms on their houses. All of your identity, all of your character, all of your credibility was wrapped into being a part of that village, a part of that community. Anyone who would leave was expressing rebellion and was essentially being cut off from the family.

So, when the Bible tells us that this young man went to the far country, it is not only telling us that he made a geographical change in his life. The Bible is telling us that there was a serious attitudinal change in his life. What happened in this young man's life was that he brought shame to his family. Instead of being a son who would help to extend the holdings and the earnings of his father, he left his father and his family, and he chose a different location.

I wonder how many people are spiritually living in the far country. God's great desire for your life is that your identity would be found with His family, His people, and with His purpose. Yet, rather than living for the purpose of God in your life, you have chosen a location called the far country. It may not be very far away geographically, but from a dispositional and an attitudinal manner, it is a long way from where God would have you to be.

The Bible not only talks about the location of this son, the Bible talks to us about the lifestyle of this son. The Bible tells us that not only did he go to the far country, but look at the rest of this phrase: Luke 15:13,

“...and there wasted...”

We talk today about people who go out and become wasted . Usually it is associated with drunkenness. It is associated with some great form of irresponsibility, potentially some act of immorality in their life such as the use of drugs or the use of some form of escapism. The Bible says here that this young man went to the far country and wasted his possessions on prodigal living . We do not know exactly what that prodigal living is, but we can imagine what it is. To be prodigal in your lifestyle simply means to live to the extreme opposite of what the values and the virtues of your family have been. That is exactly what this young man did. He went for pleasure. He went to pursue anything and everything that would make him the center of his universe and that would make him the driving force of his life. Whatever was zesty, whatever was tangy, whatever had something to fire him up, he went after.

The Bible says he lived a lifestyle called the prodigal lifestyle. Yet, as is always the case, the Bible describes a low point of this son. It says clearly there is pleasure in sin for a season. Do not get me wrong! There is a great season of pleasure in sin! You can have a great time living in the world! You can have a great time being a rebel! You can have an incredible journey and experience some wonderful moments of pleasure when you simply leave God and go to the far country; when you simply forget the family values of the people of God and choose the lifestyle called the alternative lifestyle. There are a lot of kicks!

However, there are also some kickbacks. The Bible clearly tells what happened in Luke 15:14,

“But when he had spent all...”

He came to the end. He used up everything he had. He was used and abused. Luke 15:14,

“But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in that land...”

Something beyond his control began to have impact on him. Luke 15:14 (continued),

“...he began to be in want.”

That is almost a soft way of putting it. The guy hit bottom! He realized that his life was empty, that he was going nowhere, and that he was stuck. He did not enjoy the pleasures anymore. The pleasure had only brought pain. He woke up day after day feeling as if he was nothing and feeling that he was wasted in life. That is where he woke up. Luke 15:15,

“Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine.”

The Jewish listeners who heard this parable that day must have gasped when they heard that. We do not think anything about it today. So he was slopping hogs. However, for a Jewish boy in that day, that was the epitome of being at the low point of life. To a Jew, there was no association with pork. You did not eat it. You did not sacrifice it. You simply remained away from it.

In the book of Acts, we read about a great conflict with Peter and God. God is trying to get Peter to go and to witness to Gentiles. God brought down this big blanket full of food, and on it were some pigs. There was some barbecue on that blanket! Peter said, [paraphrased] “God, I can’t eat it.” God said, [paraphrased] “Don’t you call unclean what I have called clean.” Yet, in the mind of a Jew, nothing was worse than slopping hogs. Nothing could be more the antithesis of who a Jew was intended to be than that of a Jew associated with pigs. That is where this guy was living. He was wallowing in the dirt. He was living in the pig sty. Luke 15:16,

“And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate...”

He was so hungry, he was so wasted, that he wanted what the pigs ate. Yet, look at the rest of that verse. It is so powerful! Luke 15:16 (continued),

“...and no one gave him anything.”

Here was the guy who was buying the next round of drinks. Here was the guy who was paying and tipping well to those who brought him pleasure. Here was the guy who had used what he had, and used it over and over. Yet, when he was broken nobody would give him a break. That is how this world is. As long as you are a player, you get all the breaks. However, when you are broken, nobody will give you a break. The Bible says that this son was broken and there was no break to be had. He hit bottom and he was at his low point in his life.

Then, it says that he came to himself. I do not know what it was. I do not know how it happened. I just know that the Bible says there was a moment when this young man came to himself and he said, Luke 15:17,

“...How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare ...”

Literally, we see him in a location called the far country. We see him in a lifestyle called wasted prodigal living. We see him at the low point when he could not get a break. Then, it is almost as though he is listening to an inner voice. It is as though something speaks to his heart. Suddenly, he just says aloud one day, “Dad! Dad! My dad has people who work for him who are taken care of better than I am.” It was as if he heard the voice of his father again. It was as if he suddenly realized that he did not have to stay in that condition. The Bible says that he started listening again.

Pleasure has an incredible ability to numb our conscience. It has the ability to take away our listening and our sensitivity, but what pleasure numbs, pain revives. God used the pain of the emptiness of that moment in his life to bring this son to a place where he was willing to listen again.

It was C. S. Lewis who said, “Pain is God’s megaphone. He whispers to us in our pleasure, but He shouts in our pain.” Suddenly, the voice of the Father was shouting in this young man’s heart, and he came to himself and said, “I need to go back home.”

I love what the Bible tells us in the next verse. It simply says in Luke 15:20,

“And he arose and came to his father...”

What a clear picture of repentance this is! He did not just sit there and wonder if dad was thinking about him. He did not do what some people would do today and just pick up the phone and call and say, “Hey, Dad!” He got himself together. He decided that whatever it took to make the journey back, he was going back home. He said, “I am going back to my father. I must get back to my homeland. I must go back to the village, to the community where all of my identity is. I must go back to my family.”

The Bible says he changed locations. He left the far country and he came back to the father’s house. That is what repentance is. It is when you realize that you are living in the far country, and you are going the way of the far country. You stop and say, “I do not want to be here anymore. I do not want to live like this anymore. I am going back to the Father’s house.” That is exactly what happened with that son. He repented of his sin. He recognized that he was not right with his father. He also recognized that the thing that was more wrong with him than anything else was not just that he was out of money, but that he had broken his relationship with his father .

He was like the little boy I talked to at Vacation Bible School. When I gave the invitation, a number of children came forward. I had the joy of counseling a little boy who was between 9 and 10 years old. We sat down together after the service. I looked at this little boy and said, “Well, tell me why you came.” He said, “Well, Pastor, I want you to know that I am saved and I have been baptized, but I have been sinning a lot!” I just smiled and thought to myself, “Oh, God, if a church full of people would just get honest and say that!” That is repentance! That is what was going on in that little boy’s heart that day. He was a saved little boy who needed to make some things right with the Lord.

This son was a lost son who needed to come back home, as the Bible tells us. He came back to his dad. When you are reading these verses, it is almost as though your heart is warming and you are feeling good about this son. You are feeling good about what is happening, and you like the picture of the son recognizing what he has done wrong and returning to the father. Yet, as wonderful as that moment is to see that son moving out of the pigpen and moving back to the father's house, it cannot begin to compare with what the rest of these verses tell us. Luke 15:20,

“And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him.”

Do you understand what this is saying? God loves you so much that regardless of how far you have been away from Him, when you repent of your sin and turn to the Lord, God wants to meet you because of His love for you. What an incredible picture of the love of a faithful Father! In this picture, the father stood to his feet. He did not harden himself and did not remove himself. He did not say, “Let's see what this boy has to say.” He simply saw his son and ran to receive him. He put his arms around him. If only we would understand how eager God is to make us right with Him!

Not only did he run to receive him, the Bible says he rushed to restore him. Immediately, he hugged him, he kissed him, and then he said, “Bring the best robe!” He did not say, “Bring a robe.” He said, “Bring me the best robe we have! Bring me a ring! Start killing that cow because we are going to have a celebration here tonight! My son who was lost, is found! My son who was dead is alive!”

The Bible says he ran to receive him, and he rushed to restore him. The Bible also says the father rejoiced to reclaim him. He put his arms around him and said, “This is not a servant! This is my son!” What joy, celebration, and eruption took place in that moment! When we come together as the people of God, as the church of Jesus Christ, whenever someone comes to the Father, there should be an eruption of joy in the whole community because someone who was lost has been found!

There is a part of us that just wants to stop there and read into this story “And they lived happily ever after.” However, we need to keep reading. Luke 15:25,

“Now his older son was in the field, And as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and because he has received him safe and sound, your father has killed the fatted calf.’ But he was angry and would not go in.”

You can just picture him out there kicking the dirt, pouting, and walking around steaming and fuming. Obviously, he had some real opinions about it because when he talked to his father, he said in Luke 15:29,

“So he answered and said to his father, ‘Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends. But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him.’”

Here we move from the prodigal son to the proud son, the son who was the epitome of the scribes and the Pharisees at the opening of this story. Remember, Jesus started the story in response to the critics who said, “Why do you hang out with sinners?” I fear that through the years we have spent so much time talking about the prodigal we have missed the proud. The riveting reality of this story is twofold. It speaks of a father who is faithful to forgive and to restore those who will come home. Yet, it is also a story of rebuke to all of us who, at home, have lost sight of the joy of the father in restoring and receiving those who are lost.

That is the heartbeat of this story. It was a response to the pride of the Pharisees and the Sadducees who said, [paraphrased] “We do not associate with the scum of the Earth.” Jesus said, [paraphrased] “Let me show you that this scum is valuable to God. Let me show you that what you are showing is that you no longer have the joy of the Father. You no longer love what the Father loves. You no longer share in the victory of the Father.” Instead of losing one son, he lost two. The one who hardened himself, and the one who walked away from his father's love.

The thing that is so difficult about this parable is that it just ends. The father responds and simply says, [paraphrased] "My son was lost and he is found. He was dead and now he is alive. We should rejoice!" We do not know what ever happened to the older brother. We do not know if the family ever came back together. We do not really know how it all turned out. All we know is that this father was faithful to both of his children. This father loved them unconditionally. This father is a picture of the perfect Father in heaven who loves every prodigal one of us.

I want you to know how much the Father loves you. As I shared stories about my dad earlier, for some of you those were like salt being poured in wounds of your life. You never had a relationship like that with your father. In some cases, frankly, your dads have been prodigal dads. Instead of being faithful to you and to your family, they have left you. They have gone to the far country. They have wasted themselves. However, the primary focus of this entire parable is the story, the message of the impact of a Father whose love never fails, a Father who will always be faithful to everyone, to anyone who will come to Him.

Are you living in the far country today? Then, friend, you need to come home. Are you living in the Father's house today, but have lost the joy of the Father, the heartbeat of the Father? Then you need to get right at home. The great message is that the Father will receive you. The Father will restore you. The Father will reclaim you, if only you will surrender to Him.