

## Easter Sunday 2016: The Prodigal God of Easter

Luke 15:11-24

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### **~The prodigal God of Easter lavishly extends His grace hoping to woo us to Himself~**

Welcome to Easter Sunday. Please grab your Bibles and open them up to Luke chapter 15. If you don't have one on your phone you can find one in the pew in front of you. You will find Luke 15 about four fifths of the way through the Bible after Matthew and Mark.

Now Easter Sunday is diversity Sunday at church. That means there are a bunch of different backgrounds and perspectives represented here. And I just want to acknowledge that and say welcome to all of you, especially if you've been dragged here by someone who loves you.

Just to give you a little spoiler alert, for the next 35 minutes or so I'm going to be talking about Jesus.

Now you might be expecting that, and you might think that talking about Jesus is a simple idea, but actually it is a bit of a complex one, and that's because the question is not "do you believe in Jesus?" But "which Jesus do you believe in?"

You see almost everyone in the world believes in Jesus. But what they believe about Him varies so much that in fact we are not talking about the same person.

So Muslims believe in a man named Jesus. The Qur'an actually talks about him a fair bit. They believe he was the messiah. They believe he was one of God's greatest messengers, and the son of Mary. They call him "Isa." But they don't believe he was God and they don't believe he was crucified and so they don't think of him as the savior of the world.

Many Hindus believe Jesus was an incarnation of the god Vishnu. They believe from time to time Vishnu takes on a body. So sometimes he is a human and other times he comes as a fish or a dwarf – you name it Vishnu can become it.

The vast majority of Atheists believe in a historical person named Jesus. But they think of him as a teacher of good ideas or as a great role model to follow. If you ever see Jesus on TV this is how he is pictured. So Jesus was a smart man who did good stuff, but one who doesn't really have any impact on our modern lives kind of like Julius Caesar or Da Vinci. They existed, but who really cares.

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And then, in a country like Canada, there are a bunch of people who check the "Christian box" on the census, but don't think much about Jesus throughout any

given year. So these people believe Jesus is a bit like a gene. You rub his lamp when you need something, but other than that you leave him on the shelf.

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And when we start talking about Jesus you may be coming with any one of these perspectives in mind, or any number of other ones. But today I want to go to the Bible and look at what Jesus told us about God and Himself.

So Luke chapter 15 is the story of the Prodigal Son. It's about a young man who disrespectfully asked his dad for his inheritance before he had even died. And then he went off and squandered it. And when the money was gone he realized he was in bad shape and came groveling back to his father begging for mercy.

This is a pretty well known text, but there are layers to it that even those who have been in church forever sometime miss. So what I want to do is look today at what Jesus tells us about Himself and God in this story.

You see the confusion of this story starts with the fact we title it "the prodigal son", but that's the wrong title. There are three characters in the story, two sons and a father. And of the three there are two prodigals. And I want to deal with the two prodigals today and leave the third character out simply for the sake of time. And you can thank me for that when 12 O'clock comes and you are on to your next Easter plans.

But while I've got you my goal is to spend the time showing you who God is because that's what Jesus does in this passage.

On that note, while this isn't usually thought of as an Easter text, the idea of Jesus showing us who God is, is exactly what Easter is all about – this was what Jesus spent His life and death and resurrection doing.

So 2000 years ago God became a baby, born in a manger to peasant parents. He lived an unspectacular but sinless life, and then at 30 years old He began to teach and gather followers. And Jesus' teaching was so revolutionary that the whole nation of Israel was turned upside down by it. Some people loved Him for the way He valued people, especially the poor and insignificant. But other people hated Him for the way He minimized the establishment. Almost no one was neutral. And then after 3 years of teaching, the religious leaders had Him executed.

Now this has happened to lots of revolutionaries, but the thing that makes Jesus different was that He predicted He would be killed, and then He predicted He would be coming back three days later.

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Now others have made this claim, but no one else has pulled it off. But that's what happened Easter Sunday 2000 years ago. And that is why we are here

today. We are here because when a person claims they are going to rise from the dead and pulls it off everything else they said deserves attention. Right?

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So here is a bit of context on the Luke 15 passage. There are three parables in this chapter. And a parable is a story that Jesus told in order to get a certain message across – He was a great story teller. And so Jesus tells us about a shepherd looking for a lost sheep, a woman looking for a lost coin, and a father interacting with lost sons.

And with each of these stories Jesus tells us two things, something about Himself and something about God. First He tells us something about Himself. So at the beginning of the chapter we read:

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)

So the Pharisees and teachers of the Law were like pastors and very religious church folk. These people would have been at church every Sunday. And you might think Jesus would have fit in with this them and enjoyed the prim and proper, suit wearing people. Those who always said "please" and were quiet and constructive members of society.

But if you read the Bible you find out that ironically the people Jesus had the hardest time with were people like most of us; people who knew everything about following God.

And the reason He had such a hard time with these "church folk" was that they were suspicious of Him, and their suspicion grew to resentment. Jesus was doing new things they weren't used to. They wanted to keep the status quo. They wanted to maintain order. And so everything Jesus said threatened them - if you are a "church folk" try to get your mind around that!

But there was another group of people Jesus loved. And they couldn't get enough of Him. And these were the messed up people that everyone else looked down on. So thieves and prostitutes and alcoholics and people with socially unacceptable jobs and people who didn't have jobs – these kinds of people flocked to Jesus like crazy and He hung out with them.

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Now you've heard the saying "Bad company corrupts good morals." And this is what the religious folk thought. If Jesus is spending so much time with these down and outers He must just be one of them. So in verse 2 the Pharisees mutter to each other "[Jesus] welcomes sinners and eats with them." They were shocked and disgusted.

The word “welcomes” here doesn’t just mean accepts or tolerates. It means to “eagerly await or... look for.”<sup>1</sup> So they saw that Jesus was excited about hanging out with these people. This is what He wanted to be doing. Jesus wasn’t just compassionate when He bumped into them on the street; He went looking for them.

And He would eat with them which in the first century told everyone “hey, I’m with these people.” Try to get your mind around this because this is not what good church folk usually pride themselves in doing, and the religious folk of Jesus day were just the same. They wondered why a teacher would lower Himself to this standard. How could He maintain His respectability?

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 And this is the idea Jesus uses these three parables in Luke 15 to respond to. So Jesus says I’m like a shepherd who finds a lost sheep and throws a party to celebrate with his friends. And I’m like a poor woman who finds a valuable coin she had lost and celebrates with her friends. Jesus tells these stories to make it obvious that He wasn’t like they thought He should be. He tells us something about Himself.

But second Jesus also wants us to see He’s talking about God. So the first two parables end with specific reference to the divine. So verse 7 reads:

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 verse 10 reads:

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)

Don’t miss the significance here. Jesus is saying “I’m like this and God is like this. In fact I’m like this because God is like this.” God loves pursuing lost people. And when He finds one He parties lavishly. And in the same way I love finding lost people. And when I find one I love giving them a little piece of what heaven is all about. So I invite them in and feast with them. This is what gets Me going. I’m like God because He’s My Father.

And Jesus brings all of that into the third story about a father and his rebellious sons. And Jesus says I’m like the father in this story. And God is like the father in this story. We are breaking into your world and embracing lost sons and daughters. And we aren’t looking for the worthy, we are looking to transform the worthless. This is what gets us going. This is what makes us party. And this is what Easter is all about.

So let’s look at Luke 15 starting in verse 11.

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<sup>1</sup> John Piper <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/coming-to-yourself-and-coming-to-the-father> (Accessed March 23, 2016)

[Read Luke 15:11-13]

Before we can get to the father in the story we have to wade through this utterly ungrateful child. Ever known someone like that?

Now this young son starts by demanding his share of the inheritance. And as there are two sons in the family Jewish tradition said he was entitled to 1/3 of his father's estate. The older brother would get 2/3. But only after the father's death!

But this son says "I know you're going to be dead someday dad, but I can't wait that long. I want out of here and I want what you've got now."

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Can you imagine how the father would have felt at this point? The son wants his stuff but isn't interested in him. This is something we've all done to God. We've wanted His stuff – His blessings – but we've wanted to throw off our responsibility of relationship with Him in favor of living our lives the way we want. Dads what would you do at this point with a son like this?

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But the father in the story allows it! He doesn't refuse. While there's no doubt He was deeply hurt He lets His son go. This is what God does. God never forces us to obey His will. He loves us and wants the best for us – He wants Himself for us – but when we think we can find something better He lets us go.

So the son separates his interests from his father and sets off to pursue freedom. Whenever we leave God behind we always do it out of the belief that He is holding out on us – restricting us. And so we throw off what we perceive are His oppressive rules in favor of "wild" or "loose" living.

Now the word "wild" in verse 13 means "abandoned or reckless" and this is where we get the word "prodigal" from. Dictionary.com defines prodigal as "wastefully or recklessly extravagant." So he enjoyed the freedom of consuming his resources without care or worry. All he thought about was himself and the moment. And that works... at first.

In 1988 Ivan McGuire, a 35 year old experienced sky diver from Louisburg North Carolina was filming some novices as they jumped from a plane with a camera mounted on his helmet. The videotape shows McGuire leaving the plane without incident and excitedly capturing each of the other jumpers as they pull their shoots and disappear up out of view. And then there is a moment of shaky terror as McGuire's right hand goes down to where his release should be only to find he had strapped on video equipment, not a shoot.

The picture gets pretty jerky for the rest of the film as the ground approaches at 150 miles per hour.<sup>2</sup> And what started out free and exhilarating doesn't end well.

And so in verse 14 we see the ground coming up on this young son.

[Read Luke 15:14-16]

It's all easy come easy go until the money is gone and then reality sets in really fast. Now unlike the story of the skydiver there is grace here.

How many stories have you heard of people encountering hard times and being woken up to their need for God? So the famine in this story isn't God's punishment – God doesn't punish us here and now – but He disciplines, He uses the circumstances we find ourselves in to open our eyes. This is grace.

But this young man is still in running mode. He's not ready for the father's embrace. The ground still feels far away.

And so he tries his other options. In verse 15 he is spurning his conscience as we all do when we break our attachment with God. And so he looks for security somewhere else – with a pig farmer. But what he gains in this attachment is nothing like freedom.

And this is the same for all who seek meaning outside of God. We end up enslaved. Maybe it's drugs or alcohol or sex, but for most it's something more socially acceptable like work or a spouse or television or a bunch of novels. What it is doesn't matter, but when we go there to restore our strength and gain meaning we end up enslaving ourselves. These gods never satisfy.

And it works this way because God has set a hunger for the eternal in the human heart.<sup>3</sup> And so when we run from God and attempt to take our little earthly inheritance – our time and money and strength and talent – and use it to pursue something other than God whatever we find is never enough.

And so the most successful and wealthiest members of our society are often devastatingly depressed. You've undoubtedly been shocked by stories of people like Robin Williams and Philip Seymour Hoffman and Whitney Houston who all killed themselves in spite of reaching the pinnacle of wealth and popularity because even that wasn't satisfying.

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And I don't know where you are today. Whether the life you are living is full of meaning or whether you feel the gnawing hunger for something more. But Jesus says this is the misery that everyone who runs from the Father's house is destined to encounter. But He gives this hunger as grace. It makes us keep

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.aintnowaytogo.com/noChute.htm> (Accessed March 25, 2016)

<sup>3</sup> Ecclesiastes 3:11

looking for something that will satisfy. Are you looking for something that will satisfy? And it is eventually this son's hunger that brings him to his knees. Look at verse 17.

[Read Luke 15:17-20a]

I love the way Jesus describes repentance here. It starts with the son coming to his senses, or some translations read "he came to himself." The reality is we are least human when we have separated ourselves from God. You can't know yourself if you are running from the one who made you and the one whose image you bear. And so when we wake up to the reality of our sin and our need for God we come to **our** senses in the real sense of the word.

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Notice also that he identifies his sin is against God. He says "I've sinned against heaven and against you father." So he takes responsibility for his lostness.

This is key. Often when we think of being lost we view it as a mistake or a simple unfortunate happenstance, like a child getting separated from their parent in the mall – as an aside this is why if you have more kids than hands you need to invest in some leashes.

But the reality is our lostness, like the son's, isn't the product of happenstance – and it's not somebody else's faith – it is the consequence of our outright rebellion. We haven't simply wandered off, we've abandoned our Father. So Isaiah writes:

We all, like sheep, have gone astray,  
each of us has turned to our own way;  
and the LORD has laid on Him  
the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:6)

Iniquity is involved when we leave God. We all know the voice of the Shepherd. But instead of obeying it we suppressed it.<sup>4</sup> And repentance happens when we recognize this - we realize we've sinned and deserve judgment from God.

And so the son plans to say "I'm not worthy to be called your son." He recognizes that he doesn't deserve good from God. And that recognition is important. But notice how the father responds. Verse 20.

[Read Luke 15:20b-24]

The father cuts the prodigal off, not from sonship, but mid sentence. He doesn't let him get to the part about being a servant, because for God our repentance is never about us earning His approval. In this life God never gives us what we deserve – that's the point.

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<sup>4</sup> Romans 1:18-20

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You may know that Jesus didn't make this story up; there was a Jewish one that predated Him. But He tweaked it. So in the Jewish story the young son ran off with the father's money, but when he came crawling home the father rejected him. This story was based off a text in Deuteronomy which reads:

If someone has a stubborn and rebellious son... his father and mother shall take hold of him and bring him to the elders at the gate of his town. They shall say to the elders, "This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a drunkard." Then all the men of his town are to stone him to death. You must purge the evil from among you. All Israel will hear of it and be afraid. (Deuteronomy 21:18-21)

And this is how the Pharisees expected Jesus to finish the story. But instead Jesus tells them about a second prodigal. But it isn't the second son, it's God!

You see we make such a big deal about the young son leaving home and wasting his money in prodigal living, but this is hardly an interesting story. This happens all the time! The interesting part is the prodigal father – the one who lavishly and extravagantly embraces his foolish son.

And at this point in the story the Pharisees would have burst out laughing: "What a stupid father, doesn't he know what his son has done to his wealth and his name?" But Jesus' Father knows and He does it anyway. He's a prodigal too. He's wastefully and recklessly extravagant in extending grace even when people take it for granted and abuse it. He extends it anyway. Aren't you glad He's that kind of God?

And so the father hikes his robe up around his waste exposing his legs – something highly undignified – and runs to his son. And he throws his arms around his swine smelling son and hugs and kisses him.

With God there is no need to get cleaned up before coming home. You see with people bad company corrupts good, but with God it works the other way around. His righteousness consumes our corruption and leaves us transformed and desiring to live in the way that is best for us. But the encounter with grace happens first. And some of you need that this morning. You need to see that no matter how far you've run God is waiting to embrace you. That's the Gospel. The prodigal God makes sinners clean.

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So where do you find yourself today in relation to Jesus' God? We are all prodigal in some ways. So whether you have been running from God and wasting the life He has given you for decades, or whether you are in a cycle of running from Him and coming back; the God we worship wants to extend His grace lavishly in spite of the fact you don't deserve it. He'd rather waste it on you than not extend it. That's who He is.



See He's not waiting to drop the hammer. He doesn't get His kicks beating sinners down – that would be too easy and it's of no interest to Him. He gets His kicks restoring them. He's the prodigal God. He's into throwing extravagantly lavish parties and loving sinners into repentance. The Apostle Paul writes:

Don't you see how wonderfully kind, tolerant, and patient God is with you? Does this mean nothing to you? Can't you see that his kindness is intended to turn you from your sin? (Romans 2:4 NLT)

This is what the prodigal God of Easter wants for you today. He wants the best for you. He wants you to stop jumping out of your plane without a shoot and start living life in a way that is good for you long term. He wants what's best for you. He wants Himself for you.

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Now this is a parable. And parables are stories like metaphors. But no metaphor ever gives the full picture, and it's the same here. There is an aspect to God this story doesn't paint, but we get it at Easter. And that is the source of the prodigal Father's lavish spending.

You see in Luke 15 you might think the older son pays the cost of the younger son's party. After all everything the Father now owns was his by right. But that's where the metaphor breaks down. And Easter makes this clear.

You see the lavishly extravagant grace extending God has enough for all of us prodigal sons and daughters because He paid for it with the price of the cross. God paid the price. God came to earth to pay the penalty – to take the punishment – you and I deserve. But even death couldn't hold the infinite Creator of the Cosmos so He rose again. And it is from this infinite account that He debits the grace required to overwhelm your sin.

Friends, His sights are set on you today. God has been planning your return, no matter how far you've run. Like the young son found out, the prodigal father had been fattening the calf in expectation for his arrival. It was ready, and God is ready for you no matter where you are coming from. Our God is an extravagant, overly luxurious, reckless extender of grace. And while He never chases us into the pig pen, He is always waiting with baited breath to run to us when we turn around.

So brothers and sisters stop running from the prodigal God of Easter. Let His kindness woo you into repentance and embrace of grace Jesus conquered the grave to give you.