

## "Drawing Near to Hear Him"

Sometimes it seems a single suggestive sentence can come alive and capture the imagination. I read this week where a man wrote that he lived in a community of *wayward, angry children*. I thought to myself, don't we all? I mean, this whole world is sort of a world full of wayward angry children of all ages and walks of life. We are all part of it. Too often, *we* are the wayward angry children. Some of us are more like the prodigal in the story who wants to find himself and won't put up with anyone telling him what to do. Others are more like the elder brother who comes into the story later, outwardly conforming to expectations but full of resentment and dissatisfaction on the inside. Too often find a sense of solidarity with other wayward angry children who are like us. Then we get even more firmly entrenched in our flawed perspectives and frustrations. We listen to the wrong voices. So it is helpful and suggestive that **Luke 15:1** begins this powerful chapter by speaking about Jesus and saying, *Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him.*

For the next few weeks, we are going to draw near to hear Jesus. We are going to listen to what he says and the implications of what he says in one of the most famous passages in Scripture. The series is titled "In Light of the Father's Compassion." No matter how well known or often quoted this chapter is, it brings you a word from God that can enrich all of our lives today. It can clarify so many of our *questions*. It speaks powerfully to our *relationships* with each other, the way we judge, or on the other hand, embrace compassion for others. It can give us a sense of healthy *humility* and yet an *empowering identity* at the same time. It can heal what is unhealthy in our *view of God*, our relationship *with* him, and peace and comfort *in* him. It can give us a deeper understanding of *sin* and, at the same time, the most stunning assurances of *grace*. It can enable us to look at ourselves and other people differently. *It does so because it challenges and clarifies how we think of God.* It's one of the most powerful chapters in all Scripture. It is **Luke 15**. It contains the famous story of the Prodigal Son. That

Story is the inspiration for the painting by Rembrandt that we are using on our slides. In John Mac Arthur's book on *The Prodigal Son*, he says that Charles Dickens called this parable the greatest short story ever written. One of the reasons for that is because it has so much depth, so much relevance to all of life, and so many powerful and practical implications for us all.

I love the picture Jesus paints for us in **verse 20**, where the father, *filled with compassion*, ran to his son, threw his arms around him, and kissed him. The father's compassion is the heart of the story. ***We need to draw near and hear from Jesus the truth about the compassion of God because the truth about the compassion of God sheds light on all of life.***

## **I. THE GREAT COMPASSION OF GOD THE FATHER HAS WIDESPREAD, LIFE-GIVING IMPLICATIONS FOR ALL OF US.**

*Let me list seven issues this story touches on by way of introduction.*

***1st. Jesus shows us the lavish compassion of God the Father.*** In **verse 20**, the Father is described as being *"filled with compassion."* The word Greek word translated *compassion* here comes from the word for your inner organs; your heart and guts. This is a vivid statement about God having great depth of compassion. The more you listen to the world or your own anxious wayward inner child, the less you hear with clarity and power the voice of Jesus telling you about the compassion of the Father. In this chapter, Jesus has a lot to say about the Father's compassion. We will come back to this in a moment.

***2nd. In light of the Father's compassion Jesus reveals the crazy futility of seeking fulfillment far from Him.*** The younger son in the story leaves his home with the father and goes to what is called the "far country." This is the classic search for satisfaction and self-discovery unattached to God. What he finds is not freedom, but waste, ruin, and disappointment. Then **verse 17** says, *"He came to himself."* Some versions say, *"He came to his senses."* In **Luke 15**, repentance is regaining your sanity, coming to your true self.

In his book *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, Henri Nouwen writes,

"I am the prodigal son every time I search for unconditional love where it cannot be found."

"Addiction" might be the best word to explain the lostness that so deeply permeates society. As long as we live within the world's delusions, our addictions condemn us to futile quests in "the distant country," leaving us to face an endless series of disillusionments while our sense of self remains unfulfilled. In these days of increasing addictions, we have wandered far away from our Father's home... The farther I run away from the place where God dwells, the less I am able to hear the voice that calls me the Beloved, and the less I hear that voice, the more entangled I become in the manipulations and power games of the world." 1

*1<sup>st</sup> the Father's lavish compassion, 2<sup>nd</sup> The crazy futility of seeking freedom far from God.*

**3rd. Jesus also shows us the hidden problem in the heart of angry do-gooders.** This is one often-missed lessons of the story. The whole chapter is preceded and prompted by the scribes and Pharisees grumbling about Jesus welcoming sinners and tax collectors. Then after the younger brother returns and is met with the compassion of the Father, the elder brother is angry and full of resentment. **Verses 28-29** say, *But he was angry and refused to go in (to the celebration). His father came out and entreated him, <sup>29</sup> but he answered his father, 'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends.* What does Jesus teach us here?

When you run from God and try to find happiness in reckless living you know what you're doing. When it leaves you empty, and your life falls apart, you may say: "Wow, maybe I need God after all." But if you are like the older brother, your outward respectability and responsibility hides how far you are from your father -- how little you understand Him or cherish your relationship with Him. Only when something happens that causes the selfishness, the anger, pride, and resentment to come to the surface is it obvious how lost you are on the inside. Even then, it is easier to blame others than to face the truth about yourself. If you are outwardly good but inwardly lost, you will tend to say things like the elder brother. You'll say, "I've just about had it." "I have obeyed you, God, and obeyed you, and I haven't gotten my goat or whatever. What

you think you deserve but haven't gotten that's what you actually love and lust for. If you say something like this: *"If God doesn't let this happen, then what good is being a Christian?"* The thought there is that God is not what I really need. God is not the thing that my heart is really after. God is not the source of life. God is the one who gives the orders that you have to obey so that he will then give you the good stuff that makes life worth living. If that's what you think when your heart is far from God. Your outward goodness may be hiding your inward distance from the heart of God the Father.

***4th. In all of this, Jesus is telling us about the beautiful mission of restoring lost people to a loving God.*** In this chapter, *Jesus* tells three stories, one after. He tells the story of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. In each of the three stories, something or someone ends up lost. But what unites the stories is not simply that something is lost but that what was lost meant a lot to someone who wanted it found.

The lost lamb meant something to the shepherd. The lost coin truly mattered to the woman. The lost son mattered to the Father. Jesus says lost people really matter to God because God is filled with compassion. Lost people matter, and it's worth the effort to find them. The shepherd goes out and searches. The woman tears the house apart. The lost sheep was lost because of its own stupidity. Someone had to go after it. The silver was lost through carelessness. Someone had to search until it was found. The son is a little different. He was lost through his own stubbornness. He had to come to his senses, which is itself a gift of God's compassionate grace.

*God wants lost people to be found. These first four issues are timeless. 1<sup>st</sup> The Father's lavish compassion. 2<sup>nd</sup> Our foolish search for freedom far from him. 3<sup>rd</sup>. The hidden problem in the heart of angry do-gooders. 4<sup>th</sup> The beautiful mission of restoring lost people to God. But I also want to suggest three more that are especially relevant to issues in our culture today.*

***5th. Jesus gives us a spiritual perspective on the search for sexual and gender freedom.*** One frequent objection to a traditional understanding of Christian and Biblical sexual identity and morality is that it is narrow and oppressive. People claim it squashes individual

freedom to express yourself how you want to define or express yourself. But if, in the story, the Father's house represents living in harmony with his will and his wisdom, then breaking away from that to pursue freedom on your own terms can only be a kind of spiritual insanity that leads to futility. **Psalm 119:45** says, *I will walk in a wide place or in freedom for I have sought your precepts.* A Christian view of sexuality and identity is not a denial of true freedom but the path to it in the Father's house and with the Father's compassionate guidance.

**6th. Jesus shows us a healthy approach to deconstruction.** The term “deconstruction” is being increasingly used in our culture. When I listen to people who use this term, I usually hear something like this: I grew up in the church and believed everything I was taught. But then I started to see inconsistencies. I took a class in college. I saw hypocrisy in Christians and inconsistency in the church. So I started rethinking, dismantling, deconstructing my faith. Several high-profile Christian musicians and authors have deconstructed and even abandoned their faith altogether. One of the things that is clear in this chapter is that Jesus actually shows us there is a kind of deconstruction that is not only healthy but necessary. Jesus, in this chapter, uses the three stories he tells to critique and dismantle or deconstruct the narrow religious traditions, inconsistencies, and prejudices of the scribes and Pharisees.

But, this is crucial; Jesus does this not by turning away from faith or God or Scripture but by going deeper into it all, challenging unhealthy perspectives to uncover the truth about God and his great compassion.

*One more thing...*

**7th. Jesus shows us it is critical to remember the compassion of God when we find ourselves in conflict with people.** The chapter begins with two groups of people at odds with each other. On the one hand, the religious and usually conservative, law-abiding Scribes and Pharisees. On the other hand, the irreligious, somewhat scandalous sinners and tax collectors. When everything is said and done, neither group is perfect or above critique. Are they equally bad? Jesus doesn't address that question – after all, they aren't running for office! What he does instead is show that there is more than one way to be far from God. Jesus shows us that following him will often require us to choose

what has to be seen as a kind of third way in that it doesn't fully conform to the primary options offered to us in the culture. The compassion of God should move us not only to draw near to him but also to reflect his compassion and the compassion we have received *from* him in our treatment of each other.

I saw where someone recently said that in an age of cancel culture, compassion is divisive. We feel the issues so strongly and believe them to be so important that hate, anger, frustration, and pride are more easily accessed than compassion. Jesus never compromised his convictions. But he is repeatedly described in the gospels as looking on the crowds, the multitudes, the people in all their wounded but willful and wayward brokenness and feeling what? Compassion.

If you take pure white light and pass it through a prism, the prism will reveal it to contain all the varied hues and colors of the spectrum. In the same way, the compassion of God as displayed in Jesus and the gospel is revealed in Scripture to have implications that color all of life.

So...

## **II. WHEN WE DRAW NEAR TO HEAR JESUS HE REVEALS THE GREAT COMPASSION OF GOD THE FATHER.**

**Verse 20** is crucial. *And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion and ran and embraced him and kissed him.* Some Christians seem to think that the church has talked so much about the love of God that we ought to just put that on the back burner and talk more about the impending judgment of God for all the sin, and general unholiness in the world. Many of us can understand that. There's no question we need to talk about God's righteous judgment and his hatred of sin. We should point out that the backdrop in all of these stories of heaven rejoicing over one sinner who repents is the terrible reality that unrepentant sinners will remain lost forever. The elder brother never joins the celebration.

Perhaps what the Pharisees and Scribes were grumbling about at the beginning of this chapter was the fear that Jesus, by welcoming and eating with known sinners, was downplaying the ugliness of sin.

Nevertheless, what Jesus focuses on in the chapter, especially in the prodigal son's story, is compassion. Look at the five indications of the Father's compassion for His son in **verse 20** alone: 1st) He watched for him, 2nd) felt compassion for him, 3rd) ran to him, 4th) embraced him, and 5th) kissed him.

Let me ask you. You see that vivid picture Jesus paints, but is that how you picture God the Father responding to you whenever you draw near to him? Think about **Hebrews 4:16**: *Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.* Do you picture drawing near to God with confidence and finding God as the father who watches for you and runs to you, embraces and kisses you? Is that how you see him? Is that not how Jesus clearly wants us to see him here?

And isn't it precisely because Jesus *is* the one who tells this story that we can draw near to hear him and believe his revelation of God's compassion is true and is for us? He told this story on his way to the cross? On the cross, he paid the penalty for our sins. The foolish rebelliousness that leads us to the far country, the hypocritical finger-pointing that grumbles about those other sinners out there, he took all that on himself. He bore the penalty we deserve for us. We do not earn or deserve God's saving grace of loving compassion. We simply receive it by faith. And then, we spend our lives learning to live in the light of it.

## CONCLUSION

As sometimes happens when I am led in a particular direction for a sermon, I will providentially find "at hand" a book or resource that fits the theme. I was contemplating the thought of the Father's compassion one day this week when I noticed an old but unread book on my bookshelf. It was titled *Abba's Child* by Brennan Manning. Of course, *Abba* is the Aramaic word for Father that Jesus repeatedly used. I picked it up, and it fell open to a story about a man named John Eagan. In his journal, John was recording something a friend and counselor told him on a spiritual retreat when he had been struggling

with unworthiness. His friend said this:

*“John.... Define yourself radically as one beloved by God. God’s love for you and his choice of you constitute your worth. Accept that and let it become the most important thing in your life.”*

He then reflects,

*“The basis of my personal worth is not my possessions, my talents, not esteem of others, reputation... not kudos of appreciation from parents and kids (he was a high school teacher) not applause, and everyone telling you how important you are to the place.... I stand anchored now in God before whom I stand naked. This God who tells me you are my son, my beloved one.” 2*

What would it be like for you to lay aside any illusions of achieving some kind of worthiness before God or, for that matter, before the world or your own critical judgment? What would it be like instead to live every day and face every challenge in light of the Father’s gracious and undeserved welcome and compassion? Think about that.

**Amen**



# Confession of Faith

## Ephesians 2:4-10

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, <sup>5</sup> even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace, you have been saved— <sup>6</sup> and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup> so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup> For by grace, you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, <sup>9</sup> not a result of works, so that no one may boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them

## A Prayer Expressing Faith in Christ

God of grace and compassion, I thank you that you have revealed such great grace and compassion in Jesus. Not only in his powerful teaching but in his sacrificial life, his dying for my sins on the cross, and his resurrection from the dead as my Lord and Savior. I repent of my sins, for I have often been either rebelliously foolish or self-righteously resentful and judgmental. Forgive me, for Christ's sake. I trust in him and not in myself or my righteousness. I praise you that in Christ, I receive compassion instead of condemnation. Amen

## Prayer for Spiritual Renewal

Holy Father, Help me live a life of deep faith in your continued presence and overflowing goodness. Continually deliver me from my foolish rebellion and from self-righteous blindness. Enable me to see with eyes of faith the reality of who you are, flooding my life with lavish grace. Help me to lay aside every illusion of worthiness to humbly receive your compassion and to live all of my life in light of it. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/169164-the-return-of-the-prodigal-son-a-story-of-homecoming>

<sup>2</sup> Brennan Manning, *Abba's Child*, pp. 50-51