

"A Journey To The Far Country"

"If we stand back to ask what we have learned about happiness over the centuries, it is striking to see our lack of progress." That quote comes from Tim Keller's excellent book, *"Making Sense of God."*¹ It is found in a chapter in which he quotes psychologists, sociologists, artists, celebrities, and Scripture. All of them agree that for many people, life is spent searching for satisfaction or freedom that ends up deeply disappointing and too often profoundly harmful. The story of the Prodigal Son, as it is often called in **Luke 15**, is a well-known story of chasing after fulfillment and satisfaction that you never really find.

It contains many lessons for all of us about our search for happiness.

This is our third message in a series titled, *In Light of the Father's Compassion*. In spite of the fact that this is called the parable of the prodigal son, he is not the only character in the story. We're going to focus on his journey to the far country this morning but notice the story begins in **Luke 15:1-2**. *Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him.*² *And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."* It's clear that there are two groups of people in view. In **verse 11**, the parable begins with a man with how many sons? He had "two sons." There are two different kinds of sons. So to call this the story of *The Prodigal Son* is a little misleading in that it doesn't recognize how much of the story is about the elder brother. The two sons correspond to these two groups of people.

The Pharisees and tax collectors are represented by the elder brother. They are very big on outwardly keeping the rules and obeying the laws. The posture of their hearts is another story, but they are moral, religious, and conservative. Jesus aims his primary message at them. He wants them to see their pride and spiritual blindness. The younger son corresponds to the tax collectors and sinners. They don't care about traditional morality. They want to cast off all restraints and seek satisfaction and happiness their way. While Jesus will bring the story to a close with a powerful appeal for the elder brother to change his heart in light of the Father's compassion, he doesn't hesitate to show us the wrong-mindedness of the younger brother also. It was wrong of him to leave the Father the way he did

and journey to the far country – that's a metaphor for a journey that many are tempted to take. Maybe all of us, at some time or from time to time, are tempted to take.

Today we focus on the journey to the far country. Seeing this as a metaphor for a temptation we all face, we'll ask three questions. 1.) What does the far country represent? 2.) What do we find in the far country? 3.) How do we find our way home again?

I. WHAT DOES THE FAR COUNTRY REPRESENT?

Look at **Luke 15:11-14**, *And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² And the younger of them said to his Father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. ¹³ Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living.*

In the story, the Father represents God. So asking the Father for your share of his property and then leaving to go far away is wanting to take the life, the gifts God has given you, and leave God behind to find your happiness on your own terms. The far country is a symbol of the place where you can do whatever you want without any regard for custom, convention, commandments, or even the Father and his compassion. The far country represents the place that promises total freedom to pursue our happiness, determine our own destiny, and even identity.

This basic idea is found all through Scripture and history. Ever since Adam and Eve felt what God provided in the garden on his terms was not enough and embraced the lie that they could be like God determining right and wrong for themselves, this temptation has been part of our story. It's there in the story of the tower of Babel when humanity unites to establish their own destiny on their own terms apart from God's revealed will. We live in a time in history in which our present culture is acting the prodigal, heedlessly marching down an unmapped pathway to an unexplored far country of freedom from the unwelcome restraints of faith and of God. What could ever go wrong?

One of the more dramatic areas where you can see this is in the current discussion about gender and sexuality. I saw recently that a talk show host named Matt Walsh had produced a documentary titled: *What is a Woman?* He goes all over America and also other parts of the world, asking what you would think is a simple question: *What is a*

Woman? He finds there are large numbers of people today, some with great influence, power, and credentials, who will not answer the question. They say chromosomes, hormones, body parts, none of that matters. If you want to be a woman and feel you are a woman and say you are one, then you are.

You have to listen to the discussions to hear what, for any Christian, would be a sad and misguided view of the world and of people. The mindset suggests that to say there is a compassionate God who made us male and female, and therefore a woman is an adult human female, would be perceived as oppressive and even hateful. The far country represents a place of unrestrained unaccountable personal freedom. You can, in the words of **verse 14**, *squander* yourself, your gifts, and your wealth *in reckless living*.

You might be thinking that our current debate about gender and sexuality isn't really what Jesus was addressing! But isn't it true that part of the power of Jesus' teaching is that while he speaks to issues in his day, he reveals principles that apply in ours? Let's remember Jesus' greater purpose here is to show us the compassion of the Father. He wants us to believe the truth about the Father, receive his compassion ourselves and reflect that compassion to others. We don't have to affirm a bad idea in the culture in order to love and respect the person who holds that view and is made in the image of God. Also, let's not let the extreme contemporary examples of the far country obscure this basic truth: the temptation represented by the far country confronts all of us. We can shake our heads in disbelief over the sins of others and be pretty oblivious regarding our own temptations.

Whenever, instead of abiding in the Father's house and truth, we reject his guidance to do what we want or think best, whether culturally or personally, we are falling into the same temptation even if we never take things to the more extreme expressions we see in the world.

There are a lot of little trips to the far country we take, which, while not as dramatic, are just as divergent from what the compassionate Father wants for us. When you think resentment is better than forgiveness, when you think the lie is better than the truth when you think money matters more than Christ-centered discipleship, or political victories are more important than spiritual integrity, you're not living as a child of God in his house. If God is God and He is compassionate, then all rebellion or disobedience is recklessness leading to ruin.

The far country is not some neutral place. It is enemy territory. C.S. Lewis understood this. He said, *“There is no neutral ground in the universe. Every square inch, every split second, is claimed by God and counterclaimed by Satan.”*

So this leads us to the second question:

II. WHAT DO WE FIND IN THE FAR COUNTRY?

Look at **verses 13-16**. *Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. ¹⁴ And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.*

Sometimes Jesus tells us a truth, as if in a bullet point. You get a clear statement like *“love one another as I have loved you.”* But sometimes, he tells a story to paint a picture and move our hearts. In the picture Jesus paints for us, when we leave the Father’s house to find freedom on our own terms, we discover that we squander or throw away and ruin everything of value!

There is a parade of unhappy words in the story, *squandered, reckless, famine, need, longing, no one*. If the far country of our journey of self-discovery is far from the true Father’s home, heart, and wisdom, it will prove to be a dark and disappointing desert of a place.

It’s a familiar biblical principle, in **2 Peter 2:19**, Peter talks about false teachers and in that context says, *They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption. For whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved.*

In Walt Disney’s 1940s movie Pinocchio Pinocchio is lured into a little trip to Pleasure Island. Pleasure Island looks like the world’s biggest amusement park but it is a trap in which rowdy boys end up cursed and turned into donkeys. The coachman who runs the place has a saying: *“Give a boy enough rope and he’ll make a Jackass of himself.”* Sure, that’s just a 1940s movie based on an Italian novel from 1883. But isn’t it interesting that the theme echoes the story

Jesus told. Why? Because it is what happens in life. Freedom isn't found in the far country.

In **John 8:31-32**, Jesus famously said this: *“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”* Freedom isn't found in the far country but in living, to use a word Jesus often used, abiding in the fellowship of the Father, hearing his voice of love and acceptance, joining him in his good work in the world, and building your life in light of his wisdom. Here's a twist on the metaphor. The compassionate father is the true and trustworthy architect of life and grace. I heard about a couple who had this big old house, and they were really excited. They were going to make some alterations. They were going to put doors over there on one side. They were going to take a wall out over here on the other side. They were going to add on and extend the house out the back. The problem was they didn't have the original plans. They didn't have the blueprints. And they made some costly errors. They tried to put a door in a place where they had to cut through a beam, and they couldn't cut through the beam. They had no idea the beam was there. Actually, there was no beam over there on the other side, and they should have put the door over there. They tried to remove a wall in one place only to find out they should have taken the wall out in another place altogether. It was very expensive and very difficult and turned into a costly domestic nightmare. Maybe if they knew who the architect was, they could have consulted him and researched his original plans.

Do you think the blueprints of your soul are missing or that the architect is gone? God is the architect of human flourishing and fulfillment. Think about this in our everyday, not always so dramatic lives. Friends, it may look like it won't hurt or even as if it is desirable to continue down a path that is not in harmony with the Father's will but no good will come from that. You might think it won't hurt to put a lie right here in the house of your life. You might think this is a great spot to tear down a wall. But what was the Father's design? What do the blueprints say? Work with the blueprints because underneath the structure of your soul cannot sustain a hole right there. You'll just weaken everything. Disregarding the Father's will, his designs, ends up leading only to foolishness.

What we find in the far country is the reckless ruin of our self-inflicted foolishness, the famine of the soul that leaves us with unsatisfied

longing, and the failure of the world they offer any meaningful help.

So here's the third question:

III. HOW DO WE FIND OUR WAY HOME AGAIN?

Look again at **Luke 15:17-21**, *"But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my Father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! ¹⁸ I will arise and go to my Father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'"* The way back to God and true freedom can be summed up with one word. The word is "**repentance.**" In **Luke 15, verse 7**, and **verse 10**, Jesus leads up to the story of the prodigal son by talking about the joy and rejoicing that is experienced in heaven when one sinner truly repents. **Luke 15:7** *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 15:10** *In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."*

What is repentance? Repentance is not just feeling sorry.

A. Repentance is coming to your senses.

Verse 17. It says: *"When he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my Father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! In **2 Timothy 2**, the apostle Paul may be thinking of this story when he uses a similar phrase and links repentance to the idea of coming to your senses. **2 Timothy 2:24 -25** says: *And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, ²⁵ correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, ²⁶ and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil after being captured by him to do his will.**

When you run from God and indulge in sin, there will be a lot of things that you may feel sorry about. But feeling sorry is not repentance. **Repentance is a radical change of mind.** *That's what the Greek word means. A big part of what we need to see if our repentance is going to be real is that the deeper nature of sin is not only about breaking the rules. We break the rules because we don't see or believe the truth about God. Sin is rejecting the goodness of God and his ways and running from the Father's house to live life your way.*

Repentance is regaining your sanity and...

B. And sanity is returning to the Father.

Jeremiah 2:13 *"My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water. To truly repent is to change the way you think about God, to get the perspective that his heart is compassion and his ways are wisdom. Repentance is that change of heart that faces the foolishness of digging broken cistern and turns back to God as the spring of living water. Repentance is that change of heart and mind that sees the far country is an illusion and a trap and the Father's house, companionship with him, is where you want and need to be. Sorrow has a place in repentance but in the end you find such a compassionate welcome from the Father that you are filled not so much with sorrow but with gratitude.*

CONCLUSION

Here's the point of all of this. ***When we leave God to find ourselves, we end up empty. Only through repenting and returning to the Lord can we find our true home in the Father's house.***

What is your relationship with the Father? Do you see the relationship with him at the heart of your life or as a hindrance to your life? His stunning compassion is not only there to receive you when you come to him but to fully support you as you live your life with him. Whatever your calling, your challenges, your interests, whatever the nature of your life, he wants to be at the heart of it all, guiding and supporting you as you work with him and for his glory. He doesn't want that to be some constraining outward demand he lays on you. He wants that to be the desire of your heart because you are living in light of his compassion.

Repentance is how we begin the Christian life. There is no drawn-out process of earning our way into God's favor by doing good work or getting our life together before we come to him. We just come because we realize what our hearts long for – can only be found in him. We repent and believe in the Savior who tells us this story and shows us this Father. He died on the cross, in our place, to pay for our sins so that we can come to the Father, be embraced by grace, and become the children of God through faith in Him.

And repentance isn't just the way we enter the Christian life. It's how we live it. Colossians 2:6 So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him. Our daily lifestyle of repentance is a joyous one in which we are constantly turning to God, in the worship of our hearts, in the quiet of our times of Bible reading and reflection, in our daily choices, and in our prayerful inward communion with him. He is the compassionate Father. We need to know that deeply.

Amen

Prayer Expressing Faith in Christ

Father, I have lost my way. I listened to the lies and took the bait. I took your heart and home for granted and traipsed off to find myself in the far country. I have sinned against you but I repent and return. I place my faith in Jesus who paid for my sin by his sacrifice and rose again to offer new life to all who receive him. He is my Savior, you are my Father, your Spirit gives me life. Thank you. Amen

Prayer for Spiritual Renewal

Compassionate Father in heaven you are my merciful and welcoming creator. I long, as the Psalmist says to dwell in your house, the house of the Lord, forever followed by your goodness and mercy with my cup overflowing because you are with me always. Deliver me from all my seductive illusions and help me to fully find my life in you. Amen

¹ Keller, *Making Sense of God*, p. 79