



CHECK-IN

How are you? Where have you seen God working in your life in the last week? And... where do you sit in the birth order in your family? Are you the oldest, probably a rule-follower and boss-of-all? Are you the baby of the family, with all the freedom bestowed upon you? Are you a spotlit, big-personality middle kid? Or are you all of the above, that is... the only child? Discuss!

OPENING PRAYER

Loving Father, remind us that you will welcome us home when we come running.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most popular and loved stories Jesus ever told was the story of the Prodigal Son. Even people who don't know that the story comes from the Bible will use a phrase like, "the Prodigal Son has returned." It's so popular that we think we know the story. And yet, it is so intricate, so deep, with so many layers, that we only scratch the

surface if we stick to the popular summary. When you start to look at those layers, so many different powerful messages emerge we can find something that can speak to each one of us, no matter who we are, or where we find ourselves in life. And so, for this series, we're going to peel back and analyze some layers of this story. And the way we're going to get at the layers of this story is by taking a look at it each week from a point-of-view of a different character. Today, we're going to start with the classic telling, the point-of-view of title character. We titled the series, "Prodigal..." so we should probably start with the prodigal son, and see what of him we find in ourselves.

Review Question: What feels like home? Is there a place or a people or an item that just feels like comfort or security or peace?

SCRIPTURE

In Luke's gospel, this story comes in a section that is a little out of the storyline. It's almost as if Luke thinks, "I'm telling the events of Jesus's life... but I've got all these cool teachings I want to fit in. So, I'm just going to lump them all into one section, and then get back to the story." The Prodigal Son is in this section of Jesus's teachings. (Remember this, it's important later.) Let's take a look.

Read Luke, chapter 15, verses 10 through 19.

His father welcomes him home and throws a party. Man, that's a good ending! There aren't many stories that encapsulate the gospel,

the Good News of Jesus Christ, the love and grace and mercy of God, like this story. It's how God looks at us. We mess up, we go the wrong way, we do the wrong thing... but God loves us so much that, like that Father, he is there waiting to throw his arms around us and welcome us home.

Question 1: Even if you know this story, it's probably been a while since you've read it directly from the Bible. What stands out to you? Is there anything that catches your attention that may not have before?

REFLECTION

The message Jesus was trying to get across is this: No matter what you've done, no matter what you've gotten yourself into, and no matter how rough life is right now, God is always there to welcome you home. And if you identify with the youngest son—if you're in a place in your life where you feel like you need a reset, where even the metaphorical pig slop of life would be better than what you're dealing with right now—God is waiting for you to come home. If that's the message you need to hear today, receive it: The Father is sitting on the porch, hoping you'll come strolling down the drive. When you arrive, God is going to throw a party. You can always come home.

Now, if you're not there, or if you've never really experienced prodigal living, remember that there are many layers to this story, and a few things we're going to unpack from prodigal son's point of view can speak to any one of us in any situation.

The first is this: the word “prodigal” isn’t fitting for the title for this story. See, *prodigal* means “extravagant or reckless living,” or even “careless generosity.” And yes, that’s how this story is known, but there’s a better title. The context of this parable matters. Remember, in Luke’s Gospel, the story comes in a section of other teaching. In fact, the first sentence of our scripture says, “to illustrate the point further.” What was the point Jesus was expounding on? Well, the two stories before this are the story of the Lost Sheep, in which the shepherd leaves the entire flock to search for the missing one, and the story of the Lost Coin, in which a woman tears her house apart to find the missing coin. Coins were a lot more valuable back then. We’ve got the story of the Lost Sheep and the story of the Lost Coin, so perhaps this story should be called the story of the *Lost Son*.

He should not be defined by his prodigal living, though it was a symptom of the problem. Just like the sheep that wandered off or the coin that went missing, the boy was lost. Jesus doesn’t give us the backstory. He never tells us what led up to this moment, but something within the son is broken. He asks for his inheritance, leaves home, and pursues what he thinks will fill a hole in his life. To go to these extremes, he must be lost. He isn’t prodigal; that’s what he does. What he is, is broken. And that’s something we can all identify with. You may not have blown your inheritance on prodigal living, but we’ve all been a little lost, trying to fill some need, desire, or hole in our lives with things that won’t satisfy. You know what fills that emptiness? You know what fixes being lost? Coming home. The

Father is there with his arms open wide, welcoming you in. That satisfies. Stop going after the things that won't fulfill you and simply yearn for God. Pursue that relationship, and you will be satisfied.

Question 2: How is it different to describe the son as “lost” rather than “prodigal” and what does that say to you? Is there an area in your life where you feel lost like the younger son? What do you pursue to fill an emptiness in your life that you know ultimately is unsatisfying?

Okay, so, how do we do that? Well, that's the next layer we'll peel back here. It begins with the question: Why pigs? Why does Jesus use pigs? He just told a story about sheep, and he uses goats in other stories, so why this switch? Well, if you remember your Levitical laws—which I know you do—Jews could not eat pork, so raising pigs was unheard of.

But the significance of pigs went further than that. Over time, the pig became more than a symbol of a dietary law; it became the ultimate symbol of a Jew's devotion. Not eating pork was the banner you wore on your chest to show that you were Jewish. It was how other cultures knew you were an Israelite. During the Maccabean Revolt, just a hundred years or so before Jesus, the Greek king desecrated the temple by sacrificing a pig on the altar—the greatest insult he could think of to their religion. He then sent officials to force Jews to eat pork as a way to denigrate their religion and shame them as a people. So, the pig was more than a symbol of a dietary law; it represented

the antithesis of who they were as a people. For this Jewish lost son to look at the pigs—the symbol of what had been used to oppress his people, something that represented not only the lowest of the low but the exact opposite of what was seen as right living—was Jesus driving his point home. He was saying, “The guy hasn’t just hit rock bottom. There’s rock bottom, thirty feet of pig slop, and then him. Moreover, it’s symbolic: He’s going in exactly the wrong direction.”

Where in your life are you going the wrong way? Is there something in your life that seems to be the exact opposite of what you know you should be doing—something that is the antithesis of who you are, who you want to be, and the life you know God wants for you? It’s not too late to turn around. The lost son does something powerful: He assesses his life. He takes stock. We don’t like to do that, do we? We don’t like to examine our lives and ask, “What am I doing that is hurting me?” because then we have to change. But look at how much good comes from it when the lost son does it. He comes home and is restored to new life. Don’t be afraid to do a little life assessment. Ask yourself, “What am I doing that is the opposite of who I know I am and who I’m supposed to be?” Then make a change.

Question 3: Are you someone who does this type of self-reflection often? Or is that something that scares you, and you avoid it? What does it take to get you to that point? Is there something in your life where you know you are going the wrong way, and need to make a change?

The final layer we'll look at from the younger son's point of view—and something we can all identify with that will help us *come home* to God—is what happens when he gets home. Take a look: What does he do? He starts the speech he had been rehearsing: **“Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.”** (v.21) Do you remember the next line of the rehearsed speech? What was he going to do? He was going to ask his father for a job. He wanted a contract; he was going to ask to be a hired servant.

Even when the father welcomes him home—running down the road to him, throwing his arms open, and embracing him—he starts to bargain: “If you take me in, I'll work for you.” He proposes a contract: “If you let me come home, I'll be your servant and obey blindly.” How often do we do that with God? How often do we think that's the relationship God wants—a contract and blind obedience? “Yeah, God, sure, I'm not worthy to be your child, so I'll settle for a contract. I'll go to church, I'll say some prayers, and I'll try to be a good person. I just hope to get a little favor in return.” Even when we do come home, we still tend to mess it up.

The son comes in with this rehearsed speech and this hope of a contract, but what does the father do? He cuts him off. The son doesn't get to finish his speech; the father won't even hear it. Instead, he restores him to the full rights and privileges of being his child and throws a party. We come in with a bargain that we think is the foundation of a relationship with God. We have this contractual idea

of what faith is supposed to look like, so even when we come home, we miss the point: “God, I’ll try to be good, and you won’t punish me. Deal?” God wants to cut us off and say, “No, that’s not it. You are my child—a runaway, prodigal-living, pig-slop-eating child—but there is no bargain to be made. I want your heart, not your obedience. I want your presence, not your bargain. I want a relationship with you because you *are* worthy. You are my child.”

Question 4: Where are you tempted to treat faith like a contract—“If I do this, God will do that”? What is the difference between obeying to earn love and obeying because you already know you are loved?

CLOSING

That’s the message of the Prodigal, the *Lost Son*: When you’re lost, you can always come home. The things you’re yearning for that you think will fill that emptiness in your life... only coming home will satisfy. So, make the assessment, figure out where you’re living the opposite of who God wants you to be. Then, simply realize that it doesn’t take a bargain... there’s no contract... you simply have to embrace that you are a worthy Child of the Father and be welcomed home.

**Take some time to share prayer requests or celebrations
and close in prayer.**