



CHECK-IN

How are you? Where have you seen God working in your life in the last week? And... what's the best movie sequel? Are you an Empire Strikes Back fan over A New Hope? Maybe you lean into the darker, later Harry Potter movies over the child-like first movie? Maybe you're one of the crazy people who liked Top Gun:Maverick over the epic, classic original from the 80s? (Yes, that last example was definitely written with a bias and condemnation in mind.)

OPENING PRAYER

Ever-present Parent God, give us the courage to entrust our pain to you, and to each out to those who have been faithful to us through our lives.

INTRODUCTION

Today, as we wrap up this series, we're going to look at a sequel to last week's character, the father in the story. But first, and for the last time, let's remember why we're doing this. We have been spending

an entire month with the story of the Prodigal Son, peeling back the layers of this awesome story, seeing where we find ourselves in it... learning what God wants for our lives. We chose this story because it is one of the few that encapsulates the gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ, as well as any other. Jesus was a master story, and this was one of his best. It is so intricate and so deep with so many layers, dozens of lessons emerge that any one of us can learn a foundational message about the heart and mind of God, and how we respond to God's love and grace in our lives. And to get at these messages, we've looked at a different character in the story each week. We began with the younger son, connecting with his brokenness, learning that the solution for being lost, for him and for us, is the same... coming home to God. The next week, we looked at the older son, and discovered some hidden messages in his part of the story... namely that he seemed to be trying *earn* his father's love. From this we learned a principal of God: that there is nothing we can do to make God love you any less or any more than he does right now. Stop trying to earn God's love and just accept it. Then last week, we began our investigation of the final primary character, the father. The obvious reading suggests that Jesus intended the father to be an analogy to God, and how the Father responds to the Lost Son is a message of God's love and mercy. But because we're not first century Israelites, there are some really fascinating layers, that when we dig in a bit... show us *just how much* God loves us. (Go back to last week and review those if you missed them... it was good stuff.) However, a second glance at the father in the story reveals some quirks that don't necessarily fit with what we know of God. So today, we'll take a look

at a second interpretation of this character that might give us another message as we close the series today.

Review Question: Last week, we looked at the depths of God the Father's love for us based on the actions of the father in this story. Did that discussion give you a different or unique or better understanding of it? Were you able to embrace God's love and mercy and acceptance better this week, or is that still something to work on?

SCRIPTURE

Let's read the story one last time... keep in mind the things we've discussed as you read, and see if you understand the story in a different way now.

Read Luke, chapter 15, verses 11 through 32.

It's obvious that Jesus intended the father in the story to be an analogy for how God operates with us. However, Jesus also humanizes him a bit and we run into some things that aren't very God-like. This will give us another reading of his character that will draw out some lessons that might be the perfect way to end this series. But first...

Question 1: Any final thoughts on this story as we wrap it up this week? Anything new stand out to you? Do you like sitting with a

story or Scripture for an entire series like this, or does this much time on one thing get boring?

REFLECTION

Most of the truly amazing things we learn about God's love come from the Lost Son's part of the story and from how the father interacts with him. But in part two, when the father interacts with the older son, some things make the father seem much more human. That is probably why we focus on the Prodigal Son's part of the story, because God does not come across as well in the second half. It raises a question: Maybe there is another reading, another layer we can explore, that can give us one more message as we close this series today. What if we take the father's point of view, not as God, but as if we are the father in the story? What would we learn then?

The first message that emerges comes from something that happens early in the story. Look at verse 12:

¹² The younger son told his father, 'I want my share of your estate now before you die.' So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons.

If we look at this from the son's point of view, we connect with the wild-child, prodigal life he is about to begin as he runs away from his father. But if we look at it from the father's point of view, as if we are the father, how would we feel if one of our children did this to us? After all, when do you normally receive an inheritance? When the

person from whom you are inheriting dies. The father therefore has to be thinking, in some sense, “My son wishes I were dead.” Or at the very least, “He thinks I am more valuable to him dead than alive.”

That has to hurt. Perhaps the son was driving him so crazy that he was ready to send him to a distant country. The story never tells us that the father was wounded by this, any who has children can imagine, it would be crushing. Have you been hurt this way? Is there a person or situation that wounded you as this would have wounded the father? Perhaps it was a careless word from a loved one, a trusted friend or colleague who went behind your back, or a relationship in which the person did not turn out to be who you thought they were? If we look at the father in the story only as an analogy for God, it is hard to imagine God’s feelings being hurt, (though perhaps they might be.) But if we put ourselves in the father’s place, this hurt and pain are easy for us to identify with. Identify it. Acknowledge it. It is okay to admit the hurt.

Question 2: Are you someone who identifies and addresses hurt when it happens, or do you tend to ignore it. Is there a current situation where are you tempted to minimize or ignore hurt instead of naming it honestly? What might it look like to bring that pain before God without letting it define you?

But what can we learn from what the father does? Well, first, he lets him go. He’s got servants and probably some beefy farmhands. He easily could have tied him to the cow pen and said, “No, you’re not

leaving.” But he doesn’t; he lets him go. What does this say to us? Well, after we acknowledge the hurt and recognize the pain that the injury inflicted, we have to find a way to release the hold the pain has on us. We have to let it go. (Don’t start singing!) To let go of the hold the pain has on him, the father probably commits his son into God the Father’s hands. It’s always going to sting a little; this was his son. The pain never fully goes away, but the hold it has over you can ease if you commit it into the capable hands of God. Whatever hurt you’re dealing with, give it over to God. Pray that prayer: “God, it’s in your hands now.”

Did you notice the second thing the father does? The father *agreed* to the request! He did it. He could have kicked him out without a dime; he’s got that authority. But he doesn’t. Instead, he doesn’t just let him go; he *sends him off*. Now, in our context, when we put ourselves in the father’s place and consider someone who has hurt us, there are a lot of ways we’d like to send them off, right? “Don’t let the door hit you...” But what we see is that the father gives him something that could help him. The kid blows it all, but there has to be an interaction there. And when it comes to the person who wronged us, maybe there’s a conversation to be had—a way to send them off with something that will help, saying, “yes, this hurt, and it may mean the end of this relationship, but I want you to take this with you.” It might be a scripture, a picture, or a reminder of who they are to you. Maybe that softens the blow.

Now, there's one final thing that happens here that we want to highlight. The obvious message would be to say that, when the person comes back, you should accept their apology and forgive them. The kid returns and wants a relationship, so you reconcile. But if we look a bit closer, that's not exactly what happens. First, notice that the father doesn't go after him. (That's another reason this might not be a perfect analogy for God.) In the story of the Lost Sheep, the shepherd goes searching. In the story of the Lost Coin, the woman tears her house apart looking for it. In this story, the father stays put. Also, according to the text, why does the kid come home? He's working for the farmer, sees the pigs eating, and realizes that his life would be better if he got a job back home. He doesn't come home because he misses his dad and wants to reconcile. He comes home for a selfish reason: to improve his own life. And so, from this story at least, we don't get the message that, if someone wrongs you, you should seek them out, make amends, and hug it out, because that's not what happens in *this* story. (It's a message we might get from other stories of Jesus, but not this one.) Instead, maybe the message is that sometimes that's not the best thing to do. Sometimes it's necessary to let them go and send them off. But the father gives us one final message: when the opportunity presents itself, be open to reconciliation. Consider what might have happened after this story ends? Does everything go back to normal, and father and son are fine? Probably not. The kid, as we saw, is still pretty selfish. He's probably going to feel some guilt and have to work to earn his father's trust again. There's still a lot of work to be done to repair the relationship. And so, when someone injures us and we reconcile,

there's more work to be done. So, if the opportunity presents itself, be open to reconciliation, knowing that the work is just beginning.

Question 3: Consider the situation you identified in question 2. What would it look to let the pain of that situation go, and pray the prayer, "God, it's in your hands now"? Is there a way to remain open to reconciliation while still practicing wisdom and healthy boundaries? Where might trust need to be rebuilt slowly rather than assumed instantly?

Finally, if we're going to stick with the father's point of view and put ourselves in his shoes, there's one more layer to uncover here. (This onion has to be fully peeled by now, right?!) And it starts by being honest... the older son kind of gets a bad rap here. In week two, we even I called him a whiny little baby throwing himself a pity party. But let's think about it for a minute.

²⁵ "Meanwhile, the older son was in the fields working. When he returned home, he heard music and dancing in the house, ²⁶ and he asked one of the servants what was going on.

He has to ask what's going on! He doesn't know; no one tells him! The father throws a party and doesn't tell him. The father has servants go get clothes and food for the younger son. He evidently has his administrator call DJ Jazzy Joseph & the Fresh Prince of Egypt for some music. All this for the younger son, but he can't spare one servant to go tell John Boy to come in for the celebration?? Then, the

servant adds insult to injury, telling him that the father killed the fattened calf. What's the significance here? Well, again, what we don't know, because we're not first-century Israelites, is that this was a big deal. If you could afford it, it was customary to keep one of your best cows aside. Most of the herd got to graze and hang out as normal, but you kept one in its own pen and fed it a different diet: grains and special grasses, fattening it specifically for monumental occasions: a holy sacrifice, an honored guest, or maybe even a wedding. This fattened calf was big a deal! And the kid got it?! That's a serious insult to the older brother who never even got a goat for a party with his friends. In some ways, the father has forgotten or neglected the older son.

The point is, the older son does kinda get hosed here. But it gives us the chance to ask one last question as we put ourselves in the father's shoes: Who are we taking for granted? Two weeks ago, we said that, from the older son's perspective, he didn't understand his father's love for him—that he didn't have to earn it. But maybe he thought he *had to* earn his father's love for a good reason. Maybe the father was taking him for granted. And so, to close out not-Godfather Part 2, maybe that's a good question to end with: Is there someone who has always been there—someone in your life you can rely on, who does the work and is faithful to you—whom you've been taking for granted?

The hope is that the older son went in, partied, and celebrated, and that the next weekend he got a goat for a celebration with his friends.

What faithful person do you need to give a goat to? Not literally, of course, but consider that question: reach out, send a text, or set up a lunch. Tell them how much they mean to you. Don't let them feel overlooked.

Question 4: Who has been quietly faithful in your life but may feel overlooked? What specific action can you take this week to show that person gratitude?

CLOSING

Okay, that was a lot of layers over four weeks! We got down to the very middle of the onion. But hopefully, through that digging and by really putting ourselves in the shoes of the characters, you found something you connected with. Maybe you connected with the Lost Son and recognized an area in your life where you need to do some assessment and come home. Maybe you identified with the Older Son and recognized a way you've been trying to earn God's love; let go of the résumé building and just accept your worth. Maybe you need to look at God as the father in this story: one who loves you so much that He would become undignified to welcome you in and wrap His arms around you. Or finally, maybe you need to look at yourself as the father in the story and either address an injury—some hurt in your life that you need to let go of and send off—or reach out to someone you've been taking for granted. Ultimately, remember that, though all those layers are so cool in this story by the Master Storyteller, the core we've gotten down to is the same: God loves you. God wants the

best for you. And there is nothing you can do to make Him love you any less or any more than He does right now. Embrace that and come home.

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