



CHECK-IN

How are you? Where have you seen God working in your life in the last week? And... it's October! What Halloween candy will you be passing out this year? Are you old school, rockin' the taffy and popcorn balls? Will you do the standard bag o' Reeses minis? Or are you the "prodigal house" passing out full-size candy bars?

OPENING PRAYER

Compassionate God, remind us that there is nothing we can do to earn your love.

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to week 2 of our series, "Prodigal," where we are taking a look at the parable of the Prodigal Son, peeling back the layers of this awesome story, seeing where we find ourselves in it and learning what God wants for our lives. Because, though this is one of the most popular parables Jesus ever told, we usually limit ourselves to a

surface level reading of the story. However, when we start to dig a little bit deeper, 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. Last week, we looked at the story of the title character, the Prodigal Son. And the context of the story, namely that it follows Jesus's parables of The Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin, suggested that our story would better be called the *Lost Son*. The prodigal living was a symptom of the problem, but it's not who he was. He was lost. He was broken. And though not all of us may have lived a prodigal life, we've all felt lost in one way or another. And so, we received the message, no matter where you've been, what you've done, how lost you've felt... the answer is, coming home. Second, we often skip over a powerful moment in the story. As he is feeding the pigs, he does a self-assessment. We don't like to analyze our own lives because we fear what we might find. But so much good came out of his, it's important for us to take stock and turn that area of our lives around, as well. Today, we'll look at our second character, and an aspect of his life that certainly speaks to all of us in any situation.

Review Question: Last week we were challenged to do an assessment of our lives, as the younger son did, and see where God might be asking us to "come home." Were you able to do that? What came from it? Is there an area of your life where you might be headed in the wrong direction?

SCRIPTURE

Now, quick recap, because it's kind of a long story, and we don't want to read the whole thing each week. (Though you should on your own.) Jesus tells it like this. A man has two sons. The younger son asks his father for his inheritance early, leaves home, and blows it all on wild living. Money gone, food gone, fun life gone... he hits rock bottom. While working for a farmer feeding pigs, hungry, shamed, demoralized, he realizes that even the servants at his father's house are better off than he. So, he swallows some pride and returns home with the intent to ask his father for a job. As he approaches the house, his father runs out to meet him, throws his arms around him, and welcomes him back. The son begins to ask for the job, but the Father cuts him off, restores his place in the family, and throws a party. (End scene.) And yet, that's not where the story ends. It would make a good ending. Lost son comes home, father throws a party, they live happily ever after, fade to black, roll the credits. But Jesus has more to say. Remember the first line of the story... "A man had *two* sons." (Jesus was foreshadowing.) Let's take a look:

Read Luke, chapter 15, verses 25 through 31.

Oh right... he had an older son, too. And this matters. Why? Well, in the story of the Lost Sheep, the story is about the 1 that runs away. Jesus doesn't give us any detail about the 99 who stayed. In the story of the Lost Coin, the story is about how the woman tears her house apart to find the one coin. Jesus says nothing about the 9 coins she still has. See, Jesus never puts in anything just to fill the space. So, if

Jesus goes to the trouble to tag on this “post-credits” scene about the older son, the faithful son, the one who stayed and worked... there’s something powerful in here we need to pay attention to.

Question 1: Consider this addition to Jesus’s parable. How familiar were you with this part of the story before this series? What catches your attention about it?

REFLECTION

Now, the traditional message we receive from this part, and what was most likely Jesus’s intention here, was this. Jesus adds this part of the story because of his audience. If we go back up to verse 1 of this chapter, before the lost coin, before the lost sheep...it tells us who is in the crowd listening.

**¹Tax collectors and other notorious sinners
often came to listen to Jesus teach.**

Which son would they have identified with? The Lost Son, right? But who else is listening?

**²This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law
complain that he was associating with such sinful people**

So, there were Pharisees and teachers of the Law in the crowd. Jesus says in another part of the Gospel, “I didn’t come for you guys, I came for the Lost.” He famously says, “you’re healthy, it’s the sick who need

a doctor.” To the lost, he tells them about the Lost Son. To the faithful, he tells them about the Faithful Son. And what does the Father say to the Older Son? “Everything I have is yours.” That’s reassuring. He’s saying... “It’s okay to have not left. It’s okay to have been the steady one. It’s okay to have been faithful. Just don’t condemn me for being happy when someone who’s lost comes home. It shouldn’t upset your ideas of fairness when one of the lost sheep has been found. Lose the pride, lose the entitlement, and celebrate with us!” You’d think the Pharisees would have been happy about this? Nope, few chapters later, they’re plotting his death.

But the message means something to us, too. Not all of us have squandered our inheritance on prodigal living, or had the rebellious phase, and had the kind of return the Lost Son had. Many of us have been Christian from the Cradle. Maybe you were the prodigal, but you’ve been home so long, you’ve become the older son. Either way, we’re all sinners in need of Savior like everyone else. Some of us just connect more with the older brother. So, if that’s you... one of the steady ones, one who, as Jesus put it, has “always been with God.” You’re good... just celebrate when one of the lost comes home. We’ll dig a bit deeper in a moment, but let’s stick with this for a moment...

Question 2: Do you identify more with the Younger Son, having left, feeling lost, coming home to a warm welcome? Or do you identify with the Older Son, always being there, having worked hard, trying to be the faithful one? Which and why?

Now, there's another layer to this story we can explore. Remember, we're peeling back the layers to appreciate the intricacy of this story, and this is one any of us can identify with. We touched on it a bit last week, because it's something the younger son starts to do.

Remember, when he comes home, he begins giving his rehearsed speech. He intended to ask his father for a job. He was already prepared to set up a contract: "I'll work for you, and you give me food. I'll do this, and you do that. Deal?" We talked about how we sometimes do that with God—we start to bargain. But the older son takes it to a new level. He sees that there is a party and dancing in the house, and when he discovers the reason, he refuses to go in. Instead, he sits outside, throwing himself a little pity party. When the father comes out, the older son pleads his case:

²⁹ "All these years I've slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time, you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends."

You can almost see him going over the list in his head: "That time you told me to clean up all the goat poop—I did it. That time I had to walk twenty miles in the rain to sell a cow so you could buy orthopedic sandals—I did it. That time I scrubbed your bunions because the orthopedic sandals gave you blisters—I did it." He has made the list and followed the rules: "I've always worked hard, doing what I'm supposed to do, and you've never rewarded me like this. What about me?"

The way he acts—this recounting of his achievements—tells us two things. First, although he may not have been the prodigal, he has a different condition with the same outcome. He did not lose his relationship with his father because he left and squandered everything; he lacked the relationship he wanted for a different reason. Although he was close to the house, he was still far from the father because he did not understand the father's love for him. This tells us that a "faithful" Christian who does all the right things and checks all the boxes can be just as isolated from God as someone who has run in the opposite direction. Are you close to the house but still far from the father? It is possible. We've all seen people who were born into the faith, did all the right things, obeyed the commandments, attended church every week, went to Bible study, and cleaned up all the proverbial goat poop—yet remained far from the heart of the father. You can be close to the house but still far from the Father.

Question 3: Do a little relationship assessment... how close would you say you are to the Father? Are there areas that seem to be better than others? What might you need to do to bridge the gap?

So, you can be close to the house but still far from the Father... but here's why: it's the second thing we learn from the older brother's tantrum. He has made this list in his head, and he is letting the father have it: "I've always been faithful." What this tells us is that he didn't have the kind of relationship he wanted with the father because he was trying to *earn* his father's love. He was begging for his dad's favor:

“Look at all I’ve done for you. Why don’t you love me like *that*? Here’s the list—see? Haven’t I *earned* your love?” We do it, too. Those of us who identify with the older son spend our lives trying to earn God’s love: “Look, God, I’m obeying. I’m doing the right things. I’m going to church, reading my Bible, and attending Connect Group. Haven’t I earned your love?”

The older son—and those of us who identify with him—fail to understand one pivotal truth about God. Pay attention. Write this down, tattoo it on your arm, or knit it into a pillow: There is nothing you can do to make God love you any less or any more than he does right now. (Go back and read that again.) We understand half of that truth: the Lost Son’s side of the story. Nothing we do, no matter how badly we mess up, will make God love us any less. We can always come home; that was last week’s message. This week, we see the other side of the coin: there is nothing you can do to make God love you any *more* than he does right now. Be good, follow the commandments, and do kind things, sure—but understand that God already loves you as much as he ever will. God’s love is already cranked to eleven and does not go any higher. Last week, we said that God does not want your bargain or your contract. This week, the message is that God does not care about your résumé. (Let that sink in for a moment.) You cannot earn God’s love or work your way into God’s grace. There are not enough chores on this planet to qualify you for God’s favor, because it is already there for you, absolutely free for the receiving, simply because you are His child.

The older son did not understand that he did not have to do anything to earn his father's love. The father tells him, "You already have it." So yes, part of the message of the "faithful" son is to be happy when someone who was lost comes home. But the other part of the story—the part any of us can identify with—is this: Stop trying to *earn* God's love. Receive it and let it envelop you. Nestle into it like a warm blanket on a cold night. Simply accept that you are loved.

Question 4: How are you trying to earn God's love? Is there an element of your faith that operates like the Older Son, where you feel like you have to achieve or obey or accomplish something in order to receive God's favor? Where do you think that mindset comes from in your life? What would it look like to let it go?

CLOSING

So, we've covered the sons. Come back next week for another character. But, in the meantime, think about which son you identify with right now. Have you wandered off, headed in the wrong direction, and need to come home. Or are you close to the house, but still far from the Father. Either way, remember, there's nothing you can do to make God love you any less or any more than he does right now.

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