



CHECK-IN

How are you? Where have you seen God working in your life in the last week? And... Halloween is two weeks away! Have you picked out your costume? Will you be cos-playing as an Avenger or maybe going old school as a witch or monster? Or, if you're past the dressing up phase, what was your favorite costume as a kid? Pictures get you bonus points.

OPENING PRAYER

Loving Father, thank you for running after us and wrapping us in your comforting arms.

INTRODUCTION

This brings us to week 3 of our series, *Prodigal*, where we are taking a look at the story 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. Remember, we chose this story because it is one of the few that encapsulates the gospel, the Good News of

Jesus Christ, so well, it's worth digging into for a month. We also chose it because it is so intricate and has so many layers, when we begin to peel back those layers so many messages 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. We've investigated the younger son, and connected with his brokenness, learning that the solution for being lost for him and for us is the same... we can come home. The last 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. Today, we'll shift gears and look at the final character in the story. But first...

Review Question: Last time, our discussion about the older son left us asking, "where are we trying to earn God's love?" You've had a bit to sit with that now... how have you reflected on that this past week? How did the principal that "there's nothing you can do to make God love you any less or any more than He does right now" change the way you think about God's love?

SCRIPTURE

If you're just now getting into this series, here's your recap. (God read the story on your own when you get the chance, it's worth it!) A man has two sons. The younger son asks his father for his inheritance early, leaves home, and blows it all on wild living. When the money

runs out, he hits rock bottom. While working for a farmer feeding pigs, 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 Act 1.) While the party is going on, the older son comes in from working in the fields, hears the music, and learns that Dad threw a party because the Lost Son came home. He then throws his own party, a pity party, on the porch. When the father comes to bring him inside, the son registers his complaint. "I've always been faithful, and you've never thrown a party for me." And the father says, "My dear son, you've always been with me, everything I have is yours... but my son who I thought was dead, has come home." (End Act 2.) That's it. We've covered it all, right? Well, not exactly. We've got one more character to dig into. Let's go back to the first time we really encounter him.

Read Luke, chapter 15, verses 20 through 24.

We picked this section apart two weeks ago when we discussed the Lost Son. Today, let's peel back some layers as we look at the character of the father. You might think you know this part... but when we uncover the context and setting, we see some things we may not have known that gives this character so much more depth than we may have first understood.

Question 1: We've been sitting with this story for 3 weeks now. How have your thoughts about it changed? Are there new things that stand out to you? Have you developed a new appreciation for the story and Jesus's parables? Or is this old hat... let's move on?

REFLECTION

If you've ever heard this passage preached on before, when it comes to the Father, it's usually something like... the Father in the story represents God, and how the Father responds to the Lost Son is a message of God's love and mercy. This is a fair take, and probably how Jesus meant it. So, let's spend the first half today, talking about the Father as an analogy for how God operates toward us.

On the surface, the message is simply what we learned last week: there's nothing you can do to make The Father love you any less or any more than He does right now. But as we've been doing all series long, let's dig into the *Father's* character a bit because, when we do, Jesus's story just keeps getting cooler. In order to peel back the layers here, we're going to do a little investigating into the context and setting of the stories. See, because we aren't first-century Israelites, there are messages and meanings that we didn't even realize were there because we don't understand all these references.

Question 2: When you picture God as a father, what comes to mind first? How have your own experiences with fathers or father figures, good or hard, shaped how you see God's love for you?

All righty, let's dig into the context and setting a bit. Yes, we still get the message that God loves us unconditionally, but what unfolds when we understand some of the things that first-century Israelites would have, is that we will be blown away by just how much. First, look at what happens when the Lost Son comes home. What does the father do?

^{20b} Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him.

We understand that part, right? When you are so overjoyed to see someone, you run to them. And that's a powerful message by itself: our God desires a relationship with us so deeply that He would run to welcome us home. The part we don't understand because we aren't first-century Israelites is that running was considered undignified for the master of a house. At the very least, it was viewed as self-humiliation—an intentional humbling of oneself—and was considered inappropriate. If you were the patriarch of a household, rich enough to have servants, fields, livestock, an inheritance for your children, and the status that came with all of that, you didn't run.

And so, when Jesus says, "The Father *ran* to meet his son," it was a bit scandalous. People in the audience would have whispered to one another, "Masters of a house don't run. This cannot be an analogy for God?" And yet, it was. The point Jesus is making about the God we serve—the Father who waits for us lost ones to come home—is that we are so loved that, when we open ourselves to His grace and mercy,

our Heavenly Father humbles Himself, casts off His dignity, and runs to meet us. We read that Jesus Christ did not consider divinity something to be grasped, but humbled Himself to be with us and to experience death so that we might be with the Father for eternity. That is how much we are loved: we have a God who became undignified for us, setting aside the air of perfection so that we might be able to come home.

Question 3: The father didn't wait on the porch for his son to reach him. He ran, even though it cost him his dignity. How does it change your picture of God to imagine Him running toward you, knowing it's an act of humility?

The second layer we uncover comes with what the Father does next. He throws a party, right? Well, no—something happens before that.

²² “Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet.”

A robe, a ring, and sandals. Remember, Jesus doesn't say anything without meaning something, so why a robe, a ring, and sandals? Well, first, the robe. Robes mattered back then. Today, they're just what you wear to answer the door if you don't want the Amazon delivery person to see you in your underwear. In first-century Israel, however, robes were a symbol of *status*. Everyone wore a short tunic, especially while working. If you wore a robe that reached your ankles, it meant you had enough status that you did not have to perform physical

labor. Now, we know Jesus well enough to understand that He is not saying that, when we come home to God, we are given a status that makes us better than everyone else. That's not the point. He uses the robe as a metaphor for reclaiming the Lost Son from his former life: "No, you're not going to be the person you once were. You are and will be my child." We are robed in God's claim on our identity—not the life we had before or the things that did not satisfy our souls, but our place as heirs to the grace of The Father, because we are His children.

Second, the ring. Back then, a ring represented authority. When you wore the ring of the master or king, you carried that person's authority. When the son receives the ring, it means he is not going to be a servant; he is going to hold a position of influence. When we return to God, we don't just sit on the couch eating Cheetos. With authority comes responsibility. When we are given that proverbial ring, we are charged with carrying out the mission of the Father. Elsewhere, we read what that authority entails: going into the world and telling others about this Father, who loves us so much that we can be welcomed home. Yes, it is wonderful to know that we are loved and claimed, but we are also given the responsibility to tell *others* so that they might experience it, too.

Finally, the sandals. Everyone has shoes these days—some more than others. Back then, however, leather was expensive, and sandals were a luxury. Many people who were destitute or enslaved simply went barefoot. So, when the Father puts sandals on the Lost Son's feet, He

is again saying, “You are not who you once were.” But he is also saying, “I’m not accepting the bargain you were trying to make.” Remember, the son came asking to be a servant in his father’s field. But the Father says, “No, you aren’t going to be a servant here. You are going to be my son.” When we come home to God, it is not as slaves to an indifferent Creator or as people who must earn the Father’s love. We come home as people who are loved for no other reason than that we are His children.

Question 4: Which of these three gifts would be the hardest for you to accept: being given a new identity (the robe), being trusted with responsibility (the ring), or being treated as a son or daughter instead of a servant (the sandals)? Why? Is there something from your “old life” that makes receiving these gifts difficult?

There’s one more layer we’ll look at. And it’s something hidden in this story that we usually read right past. What does the father do when he reaches his son? He hugs him and kisses him. We wouldn’t give this a second thought. We hug all the time, and, like in Europe today, a kiss was simply a common greeting. It’s easy for us to read over that part because, to us, it’s not a big deal.

But how would Jesus’s listeners have heard that part? If running was undignified, what did this embrace mean? Now, a kiss was common in those days; it happened all the time and is mentioned often in the Gospels. But what about the embrace? Well, a little research reveals something amazing. This moment—when the father runs to meet the

son he thought was dead, when he is overjoyed that the Lost Son has come home, when he embraces his son—is the only time in all four Gospels that we find a hug. It doesn't happen anywhere else. No one hugs anyone else except here, when Jesus is trying to help us understand *The Father*. And, when life falls apart, how often do we just need a hug? There is something comforting, welcoming, and secure about an embrace. Perhaps it was taboo back then or simply not a big deal, but for this to be the only hug mentioned in all the stories of Jesus's life means something. God the Father loves us so much that He does something so rare it is mentioned only once. We are *that* special. God wants to comfort you. God wants to hold you. God wants to wrap you in His arms and let you know it will be okay.

Question 5: Part 1) Is there something in your life for which you really need a hug, from a person or from God? What would it mean for you to let God hold you that way right now? Part 2) In this story the father does three things... he runs, restores and embraces his son. Which one speaks to where you are right now?

CLOSING

Now, we said we wanted to spend the first half on the traditional reading of the Father in the story, that he is an analogy for how God operates with us. Which means, there's a second half, and for that second half, you have to come back next week. For now, for today... think about God as that ultimate parent, one who humbles himself to reach us and is so excited when we come home, that He runs to meet

us. One who restores us, giving us a robe of status, a ring of authority, and sandals, all to remind us that we can leave that old life behind, and simply be called His children. And finally, that we have a Father who wants to embrace us, to wrap us in his arms and welcome us home.

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