



# THE PRODIGAL GOD

## THE PRODIGAL GOD: THE MOST MISUNDERSTOOD STORY

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Luke 15:11-15:24

Welcome to the Doxa Church podcast. In this series, The Prodigal God, we will take a closer look at the most well-known story in the Bible and uncover what we may have all missed in the account of the forgiving father and his two sons. For more information about Doxa or to join us for a Sunday gathering, go to [doxa-church.com](http://doxa-church.com).

Good morning, Doxa. If we have not met, my name is Donald and I'm one of the pastors on staff here at Doxa. And I am genuinely excited this morning to kick off this Prodigal God series with all of you. We're going to be in this story and in this passage of scripture for the next six weeks. You may have heard the name Henri Nouwen before, if you've been around church world for awhile. Henri was a Dutch priest and professor at Harvard and Yale and Notre Dame. He was a theologian and a writer. And in 1983, he was visiting a friend in a care facility for people with mental disabilities and special needs in a small French village. Again, this is 1983. And as the two sat and talked, they were discussing the possibility of Henri coming on staff at the care facility to be essentially a resident pastor. Mid-conversation his mind wandered, and as he glanced over his friend's shoulder, he saw a reproduction of the Rembrandt, not Bob Ross, Rembrandt painting titled "The Return of the Prodigal Son." It was sitting there hanging on the wall of the care facility. And Henri became obsessed with this painting. He would later say that it was one of the most shaping events of his entire life, which is really saying something because Henri has shaped an entire generation of Christian leaders all over the world. If you wanted to see this original painting today, you would need to travel to Russia. It's

hanging in the Hermitage museum in Saint Petersburg, and it's among Rembrandt's final works. In fact, they believe he completed it just a little bit of time before he died in 1669. There's so many details, if you put that painting back up for me, there's so many details in this painting that are actually really easy to miss. There's even some, you could even call them secrets, going on here. You notice the hands of the father. One is painted very masculine and one very feminine. There's a lot behind all of that. You see the emotionless and closed posture of the older brother. Now the older brother resembles his father in his appearance. He shares a beard like his father. He has a red cloak like his father. But he does not share his compassion, not his warmth, which is why the light from the father spills down to the younger son. But the older son remains dark and cold. There's a whole scene, it's hard to see, but in the top right corner, just above and to the left of the older son's head, there's a scene, there's a relief carved into the architecture. And it actually is a picture of the younger son playing a flute, symbolizing his life of affluence and partying. But at his feet are a group of pigs, foreshadowing his downfall and desperate times. Now, Rembrandt was famous for being one of the first world-class artists to repeatedly work himself into his paintings. In fact, he did it almost a hundred times. It's the original selfie. And in his work, where does Rembrandt place himself in this piece? Enjoying the party like he did in many of his other paintings? No. He is here in the foreground, on his knees, his feet and shoes worn, his clothes tattered, he's pleading for mercy after a life wasted. He at the end of his life realized that in this well-known biblical story, that he had the most in common with the younger son, desperately needing grace. So if you're a Christian, you've read this story before I'm sure. Even if you're not a Christian, you've probably at least heard the gist of it. And in fact, you older Christians may have seen this story play out on felt boards in Sunday school, or even seen it acted out in church theater, which I do not recommend. More recently, if you've read the Jesus storybook Bible for children, there's a fantastic retelling of the story there.

We know that the younger son burns through his inheritance, that he realizes the error of his ways, he returns home, and before he can get out his "I'm sorry" speech, his father is throwing a party, grateful that his son has come home. But I want to suggest to you this morning that you and I have perhaps missed something in the story. And it might be the most important thing that Jesus intended for a group like Doxa Church to hear, because there's something in this story that could possibly change the way that you see God for the rest of your life. That all of us in this room are ourselves most days, either the younger or the older brother, and we'll unpack that next Sunday. But today I want us to understand with fresh eyes what it means to be prodigal. You see, there's more than one character in this story that does something reckless. More than one that throws pretense and caution to the wind, and though for very different reasons, and those reasons we will see make all the difference in the world. So pray with me.

Jesus, as we dive into this text, I pray we would understand you better. That you would help me speak clearly. That you would help shape and change the hearts of the saints here at Doxa. And even though it is a story that is very familiar to us, I have to believe that there is work you desire to do, ways in which you want us to understand you more deeply and not just in our minds, but in a way that affects the very way we see you and ourselves, the way that we live

our lives. That's no small thing. I cannot speak and accomplish that work on my own. Your spirit needs to do that. And so we ask for him to do that this morning. We pray these things for your glory. Amen.

Let's open those Bibles to Luke 15, if you haven't already. Now the story we've just heard Habby read is most commonly known or talked about today as the Story of the Prodigal Son. But interestingly, Jesus does not refer to the story that way. In fact, he starts the story by saying a man had two sons. And so in a subtle changing of words, we have actually leaned on one part of the story and neglected the others. The meaning of the word prodigal to most of us has always been explained as wayward. The one who wandered off. One who runs far away and makes poor life choices. But that's actually never been the meaning of the word. There's more here. In fact, if you look up on any dictionary or on your phone right now, you'll actually see that prodigal means spending money or resources freely and recklessly, wastefully extravagant, or sometimes giving something on a lavish scale. So it's reckless spending. Giving something on a lavish scale. So let's consider a moment who spends recklessly and why in this well-known story. Well, it's obvious that the younger son does. It calls that out in the passage. Verse 13 says, "He squandered his property in reckless living." He wants the stuff that dad provides without the substance of relationship, because he's decided that he wants the gifts more than the giver. And like many of us, he only wants to answer to himself. He wants a kingdom with no king.

And in fact, in a gesture that is a little lost on us as Westerners, he demands the inheritance that was supposed to be granted to him at the end of his father's life. This is why in verse 12, he says, "Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me." Now by saying that he would want that immediately, he's effectively and offensively saying, "Father, I wish you were dead, so I could have your stuff." He's counted the cost and determined that material things are more desirable than the company of his old man. And he figures that pleasure and wine and women are the end game in this life. And he needs money to chase all of that down. So how can he possibly fund that endeavor? Interestingly, once he has it, the son spends recklessly, satisfying every earthly desire that he feels arise in his heart. And in a spending spree that I think if we were honest, many of us would envy rather than refuse, he gets exactly what he wants.

Can I tell you something about Jesus? Sometimes Jesus will give you exactly what you want. Not because it's necessarily the best thing for you, but because he wants your heart to finally lose a longing for it. Don't misunderstand. Jesus is not vindictive. He's not passive aggressive. The Bible tells us that God does not tempt us, but he will accompany you into some pretty dark places that you insist on taking him because he knows that sometimes you will only turn a corner once you have had a chance to see and hear and taste some of the death that the world has to offer, so that you know what Jesus knows. That you were made for eternity and that the pleasures of the world are nowhere near what you need to feel satisfied in this life, not even close. It's actually a national crisis in the story that begins his downfall. And some of you have been through that before. The housing crisis of 2008 or even unexpected career changes in just this last year. And some of you in many ways right now are doing the same thing as the

younger. You've left behind the people that love you the most and you're scrambling to try and stitch together as many shallow pleasures as you can. And we'll talk more about that in a few weeks. But for today, I want you to notice that the son trades in some very valuable things, very valuable things as he leaves. He trades in a house of feasting for a place of gluttony. He trades in real community for fast friends. He trades in being known for being used. At least it seems that these new friends that he gathers disappear pretty quickly when his money runs out. He trades in stability, provision, legacy, integrity, and for what? The lie that all he really needs is to be out on his own. And in his desire to find what he thinks is freedom, he actually finds that he has been building a prison with his own two hands.

So that's why the son spends recklessly. Let's talk about the father, the father, he's pulling out all the stops. He sees the son, he sprints towards the son. This is insanity by the way. Respectable ancient Eastern men do not run under any circumstances. And the father tears down the hill and he's calling for a full-blown celebration. He's sparing no expense. He's being prodigal. Don't forget that he's doing so in full view of the community that surely knows what has transpired between the father and the son. They all know what happened. They know that the father has functionally lost half of his life's work, half of his savings, and not by any mistake of his own, it's because of his disrespectful son. And the prodigal father is not what the community expected to see in this moment.

You know, once or twice a year, there's a headline that comes out in the news and tells a tragic story. And it happens over and over and over again, that somewhere in the world, a father jumps in the way of a moving vehicle to save their child and in the end expend their own. There's seemingly endless accounts, and I sincerely do not recommend Googling this because it is just so sad, but there is a long list, the same story repeating over and over again of horrifying stories of fathers diving into bodies of water, swift moving rivers, deep lakes, stormy ocean. I read one story of a family on vacation in Palm Springs and faulty wiring electrified the swimming pool. And these stories repeat with fathers jumping into the water, using their very last breath, their last heartbeats, to spare their children. I don't think as a dad that I'm alone when I would say that I'd spend every last penny in my bank account if I had to, to ensure the safety of my two kids. I would, without hesitation, choose to endanger myself, go to jail, go bankrupt to spare their lives. And I bet there's a lot of dads in this room that would make the very same decision given the opportunity. Some of you in here may have actually experienced that at some point. And the saddest thing to me is that there are fathers in this room right now that know exactly what I'm saying, in their heart they know exactly what they would do. That they would do anything for their kids. And at the same time, do not believe that God the Father loves them the exact same way and so much more.

Do you know why that reflex, why that instinct is in us dads? It's because we're made in the image of a God who does this and so much more. Dads, do you know this? That the father is not concerned with your failures like you are. That the father is not disappointed in your paternal performance like you sometimes are. I mean, are you worried about the mortgage or rent that you made last January? No, because it's handled, it's paid for, it's done, it's in the past. You carry the world of your family on your shoulders and Jesus slides in next to you to help

bear that weight so that you can lead and love your family well. He would do anything for you to bring you your good. Now here's the caveat: Jesus gets to define what good is. You do not get to define that. You are not omnipotent. You are not omniscient. You do not know what the future holds. And so for those reasons and a hundred more, Jesus gets to define what good is. And that can be a painful truth to accept at times. Let's look back at this verse, verse 20, it says, "And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion and ran and embraced him and kissed him." God is saying something very important about himself here, that this tells us the kind of love that he has for us. Not fickle, not grudgey, not harsh. And he demonstrates this repeatedly that he means it, that he will follow through, that it's not just words. You cannot count the number of times the father spends his power, his control, his authority for the benefit of his kids, for you and I. And that same story that is reported in the text of the Bible is repeated in our lives all of the time, because he's willing to spend everything he has to reclaim and reestablish relationship with the thing that he values the most in all of creation, his kids, you and me. This is Paul's point in Romans when he says, "He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" To put it simply, every single man, woman and child in here, regardless of how long you have been found in Christ was at one time the lost sheep from verses one through seven, right above this story, right? You are the lost coin from verses eight through 10. You did not start off in God's coin purse. You were behind the couch covered in those weird clumps of dust that nobody totally understands where they come from. That was you. And it's Christ that found you, not the other way around. You are the younger or older son and it's reckless grace, mercy without explanation, that's the way that the father loves us.

Yes, it's true. If the father spends like this and says that we are connected to him, if we bear his name, right? We call ourselves Christians, just means a little Christ, that we are to spend grace in similar ways, it must be because he's trying to do something in us and through us. And he does. He calls us over and over and over again in the scriptures to live like this. What are some practical examples? I think it's interesting, it's interesting that I think some of the craziest or more reckless ways that we can love this way in today would feel very normal to a believer in an Acts 2 church, but to us, because of so many layers of cultural influence, feels crazy. I mean, one example, easy one is opening our homes. I know in the introvert capital of the world, that one of the scariest things you can do is invite a bunch of strangers into the one safe, protected castle space you have in your life. That feels crazy and reckless. And for some of you, it is exactly what God is calling you to do right now in this season. He's calling you to serve. I get it. We are busy. We have very slim margins in this church. Many folks working really demanding professional jobs, tons of young families and young professionals that are spending tons of hours doing so many things. And so serving can feel like just something that's just out of reach. But maybe that is the kind of reckless thing he's calling you to do. There's something very poetic, something very beautiful, when you see a CEO of a company serving, greeting at our front door. I think that looks like Jesus.

There's a lot of ways we can show reckless grace and spend recklessly on the kingdom. I've mentioned this example before. Maybe instead of a four-star vacation, you do something a

little simpler this year and take that money and put it towards the kingdom. And we have done this as a church. There's a handful of times where I feel like we have absolutely knocked this out of the park. In 2019, when we all contributed gift cards and covered a Christmas present for every single child in the foster care system in King County, that is reckless grace. I love that. And I love that that's our church. But let me tell you this, a warning, if you make decisions to spend recklessly, to offer grace that demands a gospel explanation, others will critique you. There will be some in your life that tell you that those sacrifices are stupid or unwise. I have three or four times in just the last month, heard of people who are giving sacrificially, financially, to support Doxa as a church, and they have had non-Christian family, essentially insert themselves and tell them that they thought that was a fool's errand.

One of our staff members, Amy wisely this week said that sometimes people will make you feel worse when you're doing more, because they're doing less. Let me talk just for a moment about what spirit-led reckless spending does. And again, this isn't a financial conversation, but it certainly applies. There's a lot of ways for us to spend recklessly with our energy, with our time, with our talents, right? Now, the most obvious benefit of living life this way is that in every risk you take, every step of faith you inch out, you will grow in your confidence in the father that we cannot see, but know so well. One of the hardest parts of parenting is reinforcing and repeating to my children over and over and over and over again that every instruction, every rule in our home is there and in place for the sake of the peace and safety and joy of our family. That Kelly, my wife, and I are not interested in taking anything good away from them that would ultimately lead to more joy. I mean, try explaining that to a child under 10 that wants a second dessert, or that wants to wander in public spaces out of your line of sight or thinks it's fun to grab metal toys and jam them into the outlet to charge them up. Now, most of the instruction, not all of it, right? I'm a flawed dad. Most of the instruction that I give my kids is for their benefit, but it is really hard for them to see that all the time. So they have to decide ultimately, does dad's track record, does our history together, does it generally trend towards me blessing them and watching out for them? Could our past possibly predict my intentions in this given moment when they want something and I'm saying no? I mean, any parent will tell you, you get a shockingly clear picture of how we act with God when you have kids. You and I are no different. So reckless spending reinforces our relationship with the father.

Number two, and I'm going to end on this and talk just for a moment on this one, reckless spending opens our witness. Do you know why most people aren't interested in what Christ is up to in your life or why a lot of your non-Christian friends ultimately don't seem to ask a lot of questions? And this may not be true for all of you, but I think for many of us it is. It's because for many of us, we haven't spent grace and compassion recklessly. We haven't been prodigal in our relationship with them and gracious in a way that requires Jesus to make sense of it. Let me say what most people who don't know Christ have seen from us. It's not a nonsensical spending of grace and generosity. They haven't seen a life that as pastor Jeff has said over and over again the last six years, that demands a gospel explanation. Tim Keller points this out, and I love this. And I'm just going to warn you, this is going to sting a bit. He says, "Jesus's teaching consistently attracted the irreligious while offending the Bible-believing religious people of his day. However, our churches today do not have this effect. The kind of outsiders that Jesus

attracted are not attracted to contemporary churches. We tend to draw conservative, buttoned down, moralistic people, the licentious, broken, and marginal avoid church. That can only mean one thing. If the preaching of our ministers, "that's me," and the practice of our parishioners, "that's you," do not have the same effect on people that Jesus had, then we must not be declaring the same message that Jesus did." I love that he includes me and every other person behind the pulpit this morning. But he also includes all of you. There's a lot of preachers out there this morning that will lift up something other than Jesus Christ, and certainly won't mention the reckless love of God. I hope that's never true of us. We'll say it a lot of different ways as we walk through different books of the Bible together, but I hope that we consistently do that. As an elder here, I'll fight for that. And I'm proud to serve on a team of elders that feel the same. But Keller also points to the practice of its parishioners, the everyday stuff of life for you and I, it doesn't have the same attractive power that Jesus had. And you might say, "Well, that's because the message of the cross is foolishness to those that are perishing." I know that verse. I'm aware that the world is a broken place. That the world in its current state has a middle manager named Satan, who stands opposed to everything that God stands for. I'm aware that human depravity is real and that the flesh wars against the spirit, these are all real things, but here's what I also know to be true. There is nothing more interesting than Jesus. There is nothing more captivating than Jesus Christ. There is nothing more fulfilling than Jesus Christ.

So maybe, just maybe, the people on the east side aren't captivated by the kingdom, because the deepest cry of their hearts is to be received exactly like the younger son in this story. Instead of that, we've given them morality without really a mention of a Messiah, who for the record was far more comfortable with them than he is in a room like this, most of the time. The world hasn't encountered open arms and us running towards them on the road. They've seen crossed arms and ultimately a message that says, "You better clean up yourself before you come home because I'm not sharing a room with the likes of you." Church, can we see the craziness of this? Can we recognize the foolishness of wanting a people without the spirit of God to behave as though they have the spirit of God? Can we see how ridiculous it is to impose our years or even decades of sanctification of running our race with Christ and think that those who haven't even really started their race yet should match us stride for stride? This is I think one of the main reasons that the world is confused and even at times disgusted by the church, because we are better at rules than reckless spending. And while we're on the subject, it's super hard to love people that you're convinced are the enemy trying to kill your life and your family and your political party and all the things that you hold dear. This verse that we know well in the Bible says, "In the world and not of it." The verse does not say avoid the world and hope they die. You know, when I talk to my non-Christian friends, what I hear continually is that despite their affluence, despite all of the things that they have earned and worked hard for, that they can't shake the deep haunting sense that the square footage and the dream vacations and the promotions at work are not actually moving the joy needle very much. But they're not captivated by the kingdom, not because the king isn't interesting, because he is, but because they've known a lot of his subjects, that the people of the kingdom, that are frankly poor reflections of the original image, the original love, the original source of life and goodness, and we are the mirrors, right? He is the original image and our efforts to

hedge our bets, play it safe, not risk too much, sprinkle a little Jesus on our lives, look identical to our non-Christian neighbors, that that kind of mirror is fogged up and cracked, and they just simply can't see Christ in that. I'm not asking anyone here to re-examine your life solely for the benefit of the lost around you. But I will tell you, if you do it for you, do it for your fulfillment, do it for your peace, do it because Christ is worthy. And if you do, you will see a secondary effect. You will see things spill out of your life into those around you that don't know Jesus Christ. That will happen. When you live this way, when you look for opportunities to spend recklessly your resources and give reckless grace to others, it always reinforces your relationship with God. And it opens up your witness.

I'd love to see us as a church, grow in this, to live more compelling lives than what the world does. To tell better stories, to throw better parties, to continually run down the road to them. I would love for that to be true of us. So let's pause. I know for a fact that these conversations can be hard and in reckless spending on those far from God, we want to be wise, but I'm concerned that when you hear a pastor stand behind this pulpit and say these words, you feel something inside of you, and it's actually guilt. Now listen to me, church, if that's you today now, that's not what we're after. Guilt does nothing to move you forward. You've heard me say before, I don't think we're great at knowing the difference between guilt and conviction and the enemy would have us continue in that confusion forever and ever. And the best way I know how to tell you the difference between guilt and conviction is by asking some simple questions. Please. I mean, God help us because one of these things leads to death and one of them leads to life. So here's a simple test to know the difference. When you hear that feeling rise up, when you hear that voice inside of you, what is the tone? Everybody say, what is the tone? And number two, who is it towards? Who is it towards? I want you to ask those two questions, very helpful discerning questions, to understand the difference between guilt and conviction. When you hear that voice inside of you, what is the tone like? Is it condemning? If, all you hear is a recounting of your failures and a focus on you and you lacking track record, that's not the Holy Spirit. Does it ultimately make you pay the most attention to yourself? That's not the Holy Spirit. Does it move you towards yourself, away from others and away from God? That's not the Holy Spirit. Not only is that not the Holy Spirit, that's probably the devil. That's the enemy. Now, when you reflect on your life, including your shortcomings, which God calls us to do, is the voice that you hear sound like this, does it sound like, "I'm still here. I love you. I am for you. I have more for you. I am with you. I love you. Let's take the next step together."

That is frequently what the voice of the Holy Spirit sounds like. Does it make you want to run to God? Does it move you towards him? That's probably the Spirit. If the Spirit is whispering conviction to you, I will, I'll take that all day. That's a gift. That's God trying to get you to the good stuff. Because if you're half in with Jesus, if your Christianity is boring you to death and your spiritual life today is dead and lifeless, I'm here to tell you that it's actually a gift that God has withheld a fullness of life from you because that fullness is part and parcel with giving everything you have to Jesus Christ, not a piece of you, all of you. And it would not be loving for God to give you these gifts without the giver. It's not a win for God to let you wander off into the lie that you can experience the best parts of the kingdom without the king. That's not how the kingdom works. So yes, conviction comes from God and it's a gift. I know it stings a bit

church, but it's a gift to be cherished. It's the most powerful shaping force he uses to get us out of the muck and back into the place of hope and flourishing. Guilt will not accomplish that. And it's also not pretending that you're perfect. It's not ignoring the patterns of brokenness in your life. It's not just thinking positive. As he often does, Brennan Manning says it best, in speaking about the younger son in this parable, he says, "Paradoxically, the conviction of personal sinfulness," right? The son realizing what he's done wrong, "becomes the occasion of encounter with the merciful love of the redeeming God. In his brokenness," don't miss this church, "the repentant prodigal knew an intimacy with the father that his sinless self-righteous brother would never know."

Looking soberly at our own lives is always an invitation back to more of God, it's always an invitation to more understanding and experiencing of his love. Now here's the good news. Not only has Christ purchased every younger and older brother in this room, every younger and older sister in this room, not only has he bought each and every one of you freely and fully and forever bringing you into the party, not only has he forgiven you for all the ways that we've made it hard for others to see him, or the ways that we've told a lie to the world, that he only cares about rules, or that he's boring and stingy and un-involved, he has covered all of that, and his invitation right now is that you would receive his gift of grace. That's a good gift. That you would leave this place with a different posture towards those far from God, because you are aware of how much grace and listen to me, older saints, not just that you needed past tense, but that you need today, that you need today. So listen to me, younger brothers and sisters, those who identify with the younger, if you think the most significant thing about your life is your sin and your choices and your mistakes, the life that you have squandered, I'm telling you today that you're wrong. God is saying that you are wrong. And frankly, you should never be so happy in your whole life to be wrong. Because before you even had a chance to mess life up, God looked out over eternity and said, "You are mine. I'm claiming you as one of my own. You belong to me forever. And there is nothing strong enough in the universe to do anything about it. Not the devil, not the powers of the world, not the church, not your parents, not even yourself, no one beats me. No one gets to say a word after I declare it so." And if imperfect and messed up dads like me and others in this room would put themselves in front of a moving car or dive into swift current, what part of us doubts that our perfect heavenly father has not done far more already and will not continue to do so recklessly with us. Church, we are loved by a prodigal God, whether you had the worst dad in the world or the best one or no dad at all, God is way better than whatever dad you had. And the difference is that he is immortal and inexhaustible in his resources. So that means he will freely and lavishly spend what he needs to get you home.

Older brothers and sisters, we're going to talk more about you next week. Tim Keller, in his book, "The Prodigal God," he asserts that we have disproportionately paid attention to the younger brother in this story. That Jesus's primary intended audience was actually those who live and think like the older. And I'll say this out loud. I think that Doxa leans older, and I don't mean age. I mean in our relationship to God and to others, many of us are far more like the one with closed body language, looking with contempt on those in their sin, than those of us that are burying our heads into the father's lap, knowing that we have to have grace. Knowing that

we've found the end of ourselves. And the good news is that there's hope for all of us, older and younger, that all of us are invited to the feast. And we'll talk more next week on that. Let's pray.

Jesus, you spend your life and your resources in ways that frankly look a lot different than we would expect. I'm mindful of your willingness to go actively, intimately, passionately, go chase down that which is lost. That you, for many of us in this room, that you came to us at our lowest and called us your own. And there is a, there is a passion and a fire in you for us, your brothers and sisters, that many of us would be well-served to reflect on this week. I do pray that you would help us understand that you are far greater than our sin, that you have paid in full for the mistakes that we have made in our lives, and that when you paid for them, that all of our sins were future sins, that you saw those things in full clear view. There's nothing we can do in this life to change your mind about how you feel about us. That we belong to you. And there's nothing strong enough in the universe to change that. So I pray that today that our church, that we would rest in that truth, we would rest knowing we belong to you forever and fully. Help us, God, to receive the reckless love that you give us, and to love that way to a world that desperately needs it. We pray these things for your glory. Amen.