

## **THE EXTRAVAGANT LOVE OF OUR PRODIGAL GOD (Luke 15:11-24)**

One day a wife/mother was fixing a special dinner for her family. It was a special recipe and she had worked extremely hard to make it a wonderful meal. It was one of those days, however, when her young son was being an absolute terror. Every few minutes, he would dash into the kitchen to say, “Mommy this” or “Mommy that.” The last straw came when he tore through the kitchen and knocked over her beautifully prepared meal. It splattered all over the kitchen floor.

As you might imagine, she snapped under the strain. She picked up the skillet from the floor and held it high over her head as she glared at her son.

His eyes got big. Immediately, he turned around, ran out of the kitchen, out the back door, and down the porch steps. His mother was hot on his heels still holding that cast iron skillet. Her son dove under the house and crawled way back as far as he could.

At that point, mom regained her composure. She thought to herself, “Well, I’ll just let him stay there, and his dad can deal with him when he gets home.”

When her husband got home from work, she told him the whole story. Then, with exasperation in her voice, she pleaded, “Do something about your son!”

That’s the way it works. When you are proud of your child, you refer to him or her as, “My son,” or “My daughter.” When you are upset, you say, “Your child.”

Calmly, the husband went outside, and he, too, crawled underneath the house. Soon, he saw two white eyes peering at him from around a pillar. Then, he heard the voice of his son saying, “Paw, is she after you, too?”

I think it is common for people to view God as an angry parent who is out to get them. Somewhere along the way, to protect themselves, they think they need to hide from God. That human tendency goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden. Adam and Even disobeyed God. They ate the forbidden fruit. They saw their nakedness, and when they heard God coming, they hid themselves.

Likely, you have experienced that yourself at some point. Have you ever found yourself at odds with God? You realized that your actions and attitudes and lifestyle did not match up with God’s plan and God’s purposes. For that reason, you began to avoid God. You found reasons not to attend church. You became uncomfortable with the idea of spending time with God’s people. You neglected reading God’s word or spending time with Him in prayer.

Consciously or subconsciously, you may still think that it is risky to get too close to God. He just might reach out from behind the corner, grab you by the scruff of the neck, and give you a good thrashing. If that is your view of God, I want to challenge your perception.

The Bible clearly portrays God as a loving, heavenly Parent who desires the very best for us. In my mind, the most beautiful depiction of God as a loving Father is found in a certain story that Jesus told. We call it, “The Parable of the Prodigal Son.” We should call it, “The Parable of the Loving Father.” That is the main point of the story.

The word *prodigal* is widely misunderstood. In fact, the word *prodigal* is not even in

the Bible, but we use that word to describe the younger son in the story. Over time, many have forgotten the real meaning of the word.

One of my favorite movies is the Rob Reiner film *The Princess Bride*. If you have never seen that movie, you need to do yourself a favor. Find it, rent it, stream it, or whatever, and watch it. I won't go into the story of the film, but there is a scene where a character named Vizzini uses the word, "Inconceivable." He says it each time he sees his evil plans being thwarted. Finally, his partner in crime, Ingo Montoya says to him, "You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means."

Sometimes, when I hear people use the word *prodigal*, I want to say to them, "I do not think it means what you think it means." People routinely use the word *prodigal* to describe someone who is wayward, rebellious, or far from God.

That is not what the word means. The word means "to spend lavishly, wastefully, or extravagantly." The federal government is prodigal with your tax dollars.

Let's read today's text—Luke 15:11-24. As we do, let's focus on who in the story is being prodigal. It is clear that the younger son was prodigal. He wasted the money his father gave him. He spent it lavishly as if there were no tomorrow.

I want to submit to you, that there was someone else in the story who was prodigal. It was the father. He was extravagant with something other than money. He was extravagant with his love. While the son spent his money as if there were no tomorrow, the father spent his love as if there were no yesterday. He lavished his love upon his son despite how his son had treated him.

In addition to being a parable, this story is somewhat of an allegory. The younger son likely stands for you and me while the father in the story is really our heavenly Father. He keeps loving us despite our waywardness and rebellion. I want you to notice three truths about *The Extravagant Love of Our Prodigal God*.

## **Our Father Loves Us with an Open Hand**

Notice that the father did not try to force his son to stay. The request the boy made would have been quite shocking to Jewish ears. In their culture, a son had a responsibility to stay with his aging father and care for him until he died. It was only upon the father's death that the estate would be divided.

In effect, the boy was saying, "Dad, I wish you were dead. Just give me what I'm due, and I'm out of here."

Undoubtedly, the father was hurt, even broken hearted over the words of his son, but he didn't try to stop him. He gave his son the freedom to leave home.

I am convinced that is how God deals with you and me. He loves us with an open hand. He desires that we remain in fellowship with Him, but He grants us the freedom to rebel against His love.

Years ago, I had a dog named Muffy. Muffy was a Pekingese. During the five years that I lived on Monkey Island, Muffy did not have a fenced-in backyard, but for the most part, Muffy was an outside dog. I would bring him in when it was terribly cold, but otherwise he stayed outside. Muffy wore a collar, and while he was outside, we would

attach a rope or a chain to his collar, and the other end of the rope or chain was attached to a stake in the ground. Muffy had small measure of freedom—about 20 feet. From prior experience, I knew that if Muffy was given full freedom he would run off on adventure of some kind. The chances were high that he would either get scooped up or run over. I kept him tied up for his own good.

The father in our story could have told his son, “You are too young for me to give you your inheritance now. You are not mature enough to handle that kind of money. You are just going to have to wait.”

In the same way, God could put a collar around us, so to speak. He could keep us tied down and refuse to grant us full freedom. He could say, “You are not ready, yet.” But He doesn’t do that.

The Lord loves us with an open hand. He doesn’t force us to obey Him. Instead, He seeks to guide us in the decisions we face and steer us in the right direction. In the final analysis, He gives us the room to decide whether we will follow Him or rebel against Him. He allows us to make decisions that are wrong and even harmful. He allows us to make bad decisions not because He doesn’t love us but precisely because He does, and He want us to love Him freely in return. God is not going to plop you in a pew and make you stay there. He wants you to choose His fellowship and choose to follow Him.

When Jesus chose His disciples, He didn’t threaten them, “Follow Me or else.” He doesn’t do that with you either.

The Father loves you with an open hand. How are you going to respond to Him? How have you responded already? Have you taken what you could get and fled to a far country, far from the Father’s house and the Father’s fellowship? Or has His love captured your heart, and you want to spend your life with Him?

Our text shows us something more of the extravagant love of our prodigal God.

## **Our Father Loves Us with a Grieving Heart**

There is one distinct yet important difference between the father of this story and our heavenly Father. After the son left home, the father in the story did not know where his son was; he knew not what his son was doing, nor did he know how his son was faring. He had his fears. He harbored some suspicions, but he didn’t know for sure. When we rebel from our God, however, He knows exactly where we are, what we are doing, and the condition we are in.

It is that condition and the loss of our fellowship that brings grief to God’s loving heart. Had the father in the story known the depths to which his son had sunk, his heart would have been more shattered than it already was.

Let’s consider what happened to the boy. When he set off, he had in his hands more money than he had ever seen. He foolishly spent that money like there was no tomorrow. But tomorrow did come, and when it came, he had no money left. He was now destitute in a foreign country. There were no relatives around to help him. Likely, whatever friends he had disappeared. When his money ran out, so did they. Since he didn’t qualify for welfare, he had to get a job. Since he dropped out of high school and didn’t graduate, the

only job he could get was slopping pigs.

Think about that for a moment. This was a Jewish boy, and it was his job to feed the pigs. Jews viewed pigs as unclean. They not only refused to eat pigs, they didn't even want to get close to one. But there he was, right there in the pen with the rest of the pigs.

This boy was humbled. All dignity and self-respect had been stripped from him. When hunger meets desperation, you will do things you never thought you would do.

In addition to being humbled, he was hungry. He was so hungry, the pig food looked appetizing to him.

He was humbled. He was hungry. He was also homesick. He looked around at his living conditions, and he compared to the way things were back home. Why at home, his father's slaves had it far better than he did now!

When his humiliation, hunger, and homesickness converged, something dramatic happened. Look at the beginning of v. 17. The NLT translates that as, "When he came to his senses." The words "came to his senses" are also found in the NIV and the NASB as well as many other translations. Being humbled, hungry, and homesick has a clarifying effect on your perception of reality. It helps you grow up and come to an understanding of what is important in life and what isn't.

We think of those three things as being bad things. Actually, they can be good things if we allow them to produce in us what is needed—maturity and an understanding of what really matters.

Are you anything like the younger son? Have you rebelled from the Father and His will for your life? Where has that rebellion taken you? Whether you regard yourself as being down and out or up and in, you can be far from the Father's house either way.

You may never find yourself slopping pigs, but if you rebel from the Father, you will likely find yourself doing things you never thought you would do. When you ignore your standards compromise your convictions, and you truly realize that is what you are doing, that should humble us. That should bother us.

Maybe you have experienced a hunger in our soul. There is an empty spot that you can't seem to fill. You can try to fill it with work—housework, yard work, school work, church work, or work work, but you discover that approach just doesn't work. You go in a different direction. You try to fill your hunger with play, leisure, fun, entertainment, parties, but at the end of the day, that empty place is still there, and the hunger of your soul persists.

Hopefully, at some point you will get homesick. I pray that you will realize you were better off when you were living in your Father's house, under His protection, listening to His guidance, and seeking to serve Him. If you realize that, you will come to your senses, and you will come home.

Where are you today? Know this: If you have rebelled or if you have just wandered away, God's heart hurts and grieves for you. His heart hurts just like the heart of the father in our story. The text doesn't tell us, but I can imagine that at the end of every day, the father would go to the edge of his field, and he would look up the road, the very road which his son had traveled when he left home. He looked as far as his eye could see, longing to catch sight of his son traveling that road again, but this time coming back

home.

If you have left your Father's home, if your fellowship with Him has been disrupted by sin, the Father longs for you to return home because the Father loves you with a grieving heart.

In a small town in Spain, a man named Jorge had a bitter argument with his son Paco. The next day, Jorge discovered that Paco's bed was empty. Paco had run away from home. Jorge's heart was broken. He longed for his son to return. Jorge went to a well-known store in the center of town. He posted a large sign that read, "Paco, come home. I love you. Meet me here tomorrow morning. The next morning, Jorge went to that store in the center of town where he found his son and six other boys named Paco who had also run away from home. They were all answering the call to come home.

Regardless of the reason, if you have left home, God's heart is aching for you to come home.

That brings us to a final truth regarding the Father's extravagant love. Not only does our Father love us with an open hand and with a grieving heart . . .

### **Our Father Loves Us with Welcome Arms**

Notice what the father did when his son came home (vv. 20-24). In the culture of the Middle East, it is considered undignified for an elderly man to run. That, however, is exactly what this father did. Early one evening as the father was looking up that road from the end of his field, he saw the form of someone coming. At first, he couldn't identify who the person was; he was too far away, but he kept watching. The gait was slower than what he remembered. The shoulders were more stooped than they had been. Soon, however, he concluded that it was his son. His heart leapt within him. This was his son, and he knew that his son was coming home. He ran to meet him.

There on that dusty run, the two embraced. He took his son in his arms and kissed him. The Greek word that is used here refers to repeated kisses. He covered his son with kisses. He escorted his son to the house. He had a servant cover his son with a new robe. He covered his son's finger with a ring. He covered his son's feet with shoes. In Jesus' day, slaves went barefoot. Only members of the family wore shoes.

Before we look at what the father said, notice what he did not say. He did not give his son a lecture. He did not say, "I knew you would burn through that money and then come back home looking for a hand out."

He did lay down conditions. He didn't say, "You smell, before you can come back in this house, you have to get a bath and a haircut, and agree to follow all of my demands."

He didn't put his son on probation. He didn't warn, "Mess up one more time and you're out on your ear."

There was none of that. Likewise, God longs for you to come home. He doesn't want you to return so He can whip you or make life hard for you. He wants you to return so he can lavish His love and goodness upon you. He wants you to come back to a party, not a guilt trip.

One of the things that I enjoyed about being the father of young children was reading

to them. I logged many hours in the rocking chair and the recliner reading to my daughter and my son when they were young.

One book that I read multiple times to my daughter was the book entitled, *Adam Racoon and the Circus Master*. The book is a re-telling of the story of the prodigal son. Adam Racoon is the son. He lives in Master's Wood, the home of King Aren. King Aren is a lion, and he represents the Lord. King Aren and Adam Racoon are like father and son. They enjoy spending time together.

One day, the circus comes to Master's Wood. Adam is attracted by the bright lights of the circus. He runs away to the circus and even becomes a performer in the circus. The crowds love him, and Adam has a wonderful time. In time, Adam is replaced by another performer, and the circus master gives Adam a different job. He is made to clean and scrub the elephants. He has to sleep with the monkeys. He has no food other than left-over banana peels.

One night while his tummy is growling, he remembers how he used to have plenty to eat at King Aren's house. With the help of the elephants, Adam escapes the circus and begins to make his way home. On the way back, he begins to worry. He wonders, "Will King Aren take me back?"

The book concludes with these words:

But while Adam was still a long way off . . . King Aren saw him and ran to meet him with outstretched arms. As King Aren hugged him, Adam knew he was forgiven. King Aren invited everyone to a party to celebrate Adam's return. It was hard to tell who was happier—Adam, who was with King Aren again, or King Aren, whose son had come home.

If you have been away from the Father's fellowship, it is time to come home. He will gladly receive you. All you have to do is turn from the direction you have been heading and turn to Jesus. Take one step toward Him, and He will run to you. If you ever doubt the extravagance of the Father's love, take a look at the cross. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son." Jesus died with His arms held out wide open. His arms are still outstretched to receive you.