

SERMON NOTES
Luke 15:11-32
"The Father's Extravagant Love"

Intro:

- Henry Ford: *"Failure is the opportunity to begin again more intelligently"*

- **The more a failure involves core values, the more devastating the failure is.**
-A failed marriage is more painful than a failed algebra test - unless you have pretty bizarre values

The more a failure involves personal guilt, the more devastating the failure is.
-having an affair or having an abortion or abusing a child is more painful than losing a Student Council election or job promotion

It is precisely at this point of dealing with devastating personal and moral failures that Christianity really shines

-other religions teach how you ought to live - but offer no basis for forgiveness when you fail to live as you ought

--The Good News of Jesus' death and resurrection offers hope of a clean slate, a fresh start and the power to begin a new life after failures and mistakes and sins

Perhaps some of you have dug yourselves into a deep pit through some major failure or sin -- *and you're wondering if there's still hope for your future* -- wondering whether there is a way back home to God

--wondering how God would respond to you if you did try to return to Him

What is God like in relation to us when we have behaved badly?

Jesus knows God better than anyone

John 1:18 "No one has ever seen God. But his only Son, who is himself God, is near to the Father's heart; he has told us about him."

And nowhere does Jesus tell us more clearly about the Father's heart than in the Parable of the Prodigal Son

I. A TALE OF TWO SONS

- *Frequently the oldest child in the family is the parent-pleaser – the responsible one who complies with the parental standards*
- *The younger child tends to be the rebel, a free spirit who prefers the company and admiration of peers*
- *Firstborn children will often follow the rules just because the person in authority said so*
- *Second-born and middle children – at least OUR middle child – almost always required a reason for why she should do something she was told*

- *It is self-evident to firstborn children that you try to get the best grades possible*
- *Younger siblings want to know: Why? What’s so important about grades, anyway? Why do I need to learn this? Why do I need to do this assignment?*
- **Because the teacher says so – says the firstborn**
- *Whatever – says the second-born*

- *Firstborn children can relate to the elder brother in Jesus’ story*
- *He had been the obedient and responsible son – and yet the younger brother gets all the attention and a more extravagant celebration than anything the older brother had ever received*
- ***What did that loser do to deserve such a celebration?***
- *Firstborn children can relate to the older brother’s “it’s not fair” attitude*
- *They expect to be rewarded for their good behavior – and they expect others to be punished for their bad behavior*

- *To be the younger brother of a model citizen, parent-pleasing, rule-following, good-at-everything older brother is a tough act to follow*
- *All his life the younger brother lives in the shadow of a rival who is older, taller and stronger – and who usually excels in schoolwork and often in sports*
- *Competing with the older brother head-on may seem futile – so the younger brother adopts a different tactic to seek parental love & approval*
- *The younger brother chooses activities the older brother is not involved in or is not good at // or the younger brother develops unique personality strengths such as humor or clowning // or the younger brother gets the older brother in trouble by picking fights and then seeking parental protection*
- *Or the younger brother may figure that attracting parental attention through bad behavior is better than being ignored - and thus forges an identity as a difficult child on whom the parents will have to focus much attention just to maintain family order*

- Many second-born children can relate to the younger brother in Jesus' story – *Let his goody-goody two-shoes brother stay home and live a boring life with Dad following all his joy-killing rules – the younger brother is going to run off with his friends and have a real adventure living life his way*

II. THE PRODIGAL'S LOSTNESS

In Jesus' story, the younger son prematurely asked his father for his portion of the inheritance (*one-third // two-thirds going to the first-born*)

-his real motive was to leave his father in order to be free of parental restraint and to do as he pleased with his life

For a son to ask his father for his inheritance money was unthinkable in that society *-it was tantamount to saying that he valued his father's money more than his father's long life*

Yet the Father let him go – without anger

- the father gave the younger son the freedom to make his own choices - even bad choices - and to experience the negative consequences of his bad choices

-the father did not forbid the son to strike out on his own, nor did the father rescue the son from the painful consequences of running his life right into the pigpen

-the father gave the younger son the freedom to fail and to suffer because the father understood that failure need not be permanent and suffering can produce growth

Luke 15:13 ¹³“Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.”

What Jesus describes as the far country is a condition of the soul – and many of us have spent at least some time there

-the land of self-willed independence - running our own life rather than submitting to God's will // living a self-reliant and self-directed life rather than a God-reliant and God-directed live

-the land of self-indulgent folly - pursuing happiness by following our own self-centered desires rather than finding joy in intimacy with the heavenly Father

Longing to be free of parental restraint and to spend his life doing as he pleased, the prodigal son squandered his wealth in wild, self-indulgent living

---wanting to be his own master, he ended up as the lowest of slaves, hungering for pig food

Rebellion always leads to bondage – not freedom – a lesson that many of us have had to learn the hard way

Though many rebels and prodigals end up in some version of a pigpen – not all do -- some end up in the penthouse rather than the pigpen – but they are just as far from God

Someone once defined real failure as: *"...living without knowing what life is all about, feeding on things that do not satisfy, thinking you have everything, only to find out in the end you have nothing that matters."*

Have you discovered yet the truth that living independently of God doesn't work?

-that the things of this world cannot satisfy the deepest needs of the soul?

--that rebelling against God's authority is an act of self-defeating folly?

--that life is not all about you – and that you were made for a relationship with God that gives hope and purpose and direction to our lives?

III. THE PRODIGAL'S RETURN

Most of us won't go back to God until we have experienced some kind of major loss
-we don't easily give up the illusion that we are self-sufficient and capable of managing our own lives and solving our own problems without God's help

-It is amazing how much misery and failure some people will endure before admitting: "I was wrong. I need to change. I need help. I need God."

Yet God has created deep within our soul an incurable homesickness for the Father - a hunger for God and His love that nothing in this world can satisfy

--When the prodigal son had lost all his wealth and all his friends and all his self-respect, he finally recognized his need of his father and went back home

- **vs. 17 turning point: "When he came to his senses" = "When he came to himself"**

He came to his senses and went home

-that's what the Bible means by repentance - coming to our senses and going back home
-leaving the far country of the soul's rebellion and returning to God in humility and surrender and dependence

Repentance is more than redoubling your efforts to lift yourself out of the hole that you have dug for yourself

- **Show Bluefish clip “A Man Fell in a Hole” (2:55)**

Do you know what it is to fall into a pit and you can't get yourself out?

-Do you know what it is to set off for a distant country, squander everything you had, and end up in a pigpen?

As some of you know, I do.

--I am here by God's grace to testify that even from the depths of a bottomless pit, even from a wilderness outpost deep in the far country, there is a way back home
-it is the way of repentance, the way of the Father's forgiving love, the way of the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus Christ

--Jesus' whole purpose in coming from heaven to earth was to rescue us from the pit of sin, death and hell – and bring us back home to the Father

--He accomplished that mission by dying for our sins on the Cross and by rising from the dead to conquer death and set us free to live a whole new life

Of course, the far country is inhabited by successes as well as by failures

–You can be just as lost and just as far from God as a success as if you were a prodigal in a pigpen

–Lostness is not determined by socio-economic status or even morality – Lostness is determined by whether or not you are living in a close, personal love relationship with our Father in heaven

- Some of you have been running away from God – or drifting away from God – for so long that you wonder whether or not He would want you back
- *In fact, you feel a little uncomfortable even coming to church on Easter Sunday because you're not a regular church-goer*
- You may feel a little out of place – feeling that God extends His warmest welcome to those who attend church regularly and follow His rules – and He just kind of tolerates your presence this morning
- *If that's how you feel – stay tuned for the rest of the story*

IV. THE FATHER'S EXTRAVAGANT LOVE

- The dictionary defines a prodigal as one who is “*recklessly extravagant; exceedingly wasteful, a spendthrift; someone who spends lavishly or foolishly.*”
- The definition fits the younger son who squandered his wealth in wild living in the far country

- But, as Timothy Keller points out in his book *“The Prodigal God,”* the definition also fits the father’s behavior in welcoming home his youngest son
- *The father’s welcome to the repentant son was recklessly extravagant – because the father refused to reckon or count his son’s sins against him or demand repayment for all his wealth that had been lost*

While the son was still a long way from home, the father saw him and was filled with

-with what? - Anger? Disappointment? Disgust?

His father saw him and was filled with *compassion* for him

-broken, wounded, weary, defeated, ashamed came the son

-and the father responded to his son’s brokenness with *compassion and unrestrained joy and delight*

-the father ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him

Have you ever been embraced and kissed by the Father’s forgiving love?

-when we turn our heart toward home, the Father comes running toward us with wide open arms of acceptance and welcome

-even today, the Father is waiting for some of you to turn your heart toward home so that He can embrace you and kiss you with His forgiving love

--Regardless of how long it has been since you were last in church – our Father is filled with gladness and joy that you are here this morning – *and His joy will be made complete if you choose to stay at home with Him – living in daily fellowship with Him*

The prodigal son then proceeded with his well-rehearsed confession of sin:

'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

But before the son could say: “*Make me like one of your hired men,*” the father interrupted him and said to his servants: *'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'*

-- *The Prodigal God*

The father would have nothing to do with treating his younger son like a hired servant who would have to prove his worth by his hard work

--You see, sonship is not earned by our good deeds or religious activity

-Sonship is a gift of God’s grace that we receive by accepting Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord

John 1:12 (NIV) Yet to all who received him (Christ), to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God--

When we receive Jesus Christ into our heart as our Savior and Lord, we become God's children - *totally accepted, fully pleasing, deeply loved, completely forgiven, and empowered to live a new life - because of the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus*

When God the Father forgives us and accepts us into His family, He never brings up our past sins to shame us

--In Jesus' story, there were no words such as "*I told you so*" or "*Look what you've cost me*" or "*I guess you know how difficult these days have been for all of us here*" or "*Do you realize the agony you've put me through*"

-No such words – just forgiveness conveyed by an accepting embrace

Jeanette Clift George:

On a short flight from Tucson to Phoenix, as I got on, I noticed a young woman with her baby. They were both dressed in white pinafores. The mother was smiling, and the little baby was saying "*Dada, Dada.*" And the little baby was darling. She wore a little pink bow where there would probably be hair pretty soon, and it was just darling. And they sat down opposite me. Every time anybody went by, the baby would say, "*Dada, Dada.*"

The young mother said they were going home, and Daddy was waiting for them.

Everybody was so happy, and we all enjoyed the little baby. The mother had a little Thermos with orange juice in it. She kept feeding the baby, a little fruit and then a little juice. It was a rough flight. Every time the baby cried the mother fed her a little bit more orange juice and a little more fruit.

I don't know how to get out of this story without telling you the truth. The flight was very turbulent. (*The flight was so rough that the attendants had to stay seated.*) All of the fruit that had gone down came up. I think more came up than had gone down; I think there was more up than there was baby, and it was startling; the carpet was not in good condition. It was a mess.

Those of us on the opposite side of the aisle were not in good condition at all. We kept trying to tell the young mother it was just fine. We were handing her tissues and things. It was a very loving time, but a mess. The baby was crying, and she looked awful. We couldn't cry, but we looked awful. The mother was so sorry about it.

We landed. The minute we landed, baby was fine: "*Dada, Dada.*" The rest of us were just awful. We began to get off the plane, and we all moved very carefully. I had on a suit, and I was trying to decide whether to burn it or just cut off the sleeve. *Have you ever tried to get away from something really unpleasant -- and it was you?* Well that's the way we were. It was really bad.

I looked out of the plane, and there waiting was the young man who had to be Daddy: white slacks, white shirt, white flowers, and a little green paper. I thought, I know what's going to happen. He's going to run to that baby who now looks awful--I mean the hair and the pinafore were dreadful. He's going to run to that baby, get one look, and keep on running, saying, "*Not my kid!*"

As he ran to the young mother, I wouldn't say she threw the baby at him, but she did kind of leave quickly to go get cleaned up. He picked up that baby, and I watched him as he hugged that baby and kissed that baby and stroked that baby's hair. He said, "*Daddy's baby's come home. Daddy's baby's come home.*"

I watched them all the way to the luggage claim area. He never stopped kissing that baby. He never stopped welcoming that baby back home. I thought, *Where did I ever get the idea that my Father God is less loving than a young daddy in white slacks and white shirt with white flowers and a green paper?*

There may be some people here this morning who have made a mess of your life
-don't wait to come home to God until you first clean up your own mess
-come to God as you are – let Him love you and let Jesus clean you up – that's what Jesus does – Jesus died and rose again for people just like you
-No matter how dirty you may be with the grime of sin, He will embrace you with His love and forgiveness

V. THE OLDER BROTHER'S LOSTNESS

- What do I mean by the older brother's *Lostness*? He wasn't lost – he was the **good** son – he stayed home // working for his father // following all the rules // never disobeying an order – *how could he be lost?*

Luke 15:28 - 30 (NIV) ²⁸“The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fatted calf for him!’

After the Sunday school teacher told the story of the Prodigal Son to the class, she asked, "*Was anyone sorry when the Prodigal Son returned?*"

--One boy answered, "*The fatted calf.*"

- Well, the fatted calf wasn't the only one who was sorry – the older brother was not only sorry but angry and resentful

- *All these years I've been slaving for you*
- *Slaving*
- No joy in doing the will and work of the father – rather *slaving*
- *Duty – not love*

- *Yet you never gave me...*
- *Older brothers view God as in their debt*
- *All these years I've been slaving for you – and you never gave me...*
- *Older brothers think these kinds of thoughts: I've never been fully recognized and appreciated for all my hard work and sacrifices while slaving for God at church*

- *When this son of yours...*
- *He can't even bring himself to call his brother – his brother – rather, this son of yours*
- *Older brothers are so superior to prodigal sons in their righteousness that they cannot acknowledge prodigals as their brothers with all the same rights of sonship as they have*

- *You kill the fattened calf for him*
- *What an extravagant waste – what poor stewardship – **how unfair!***
- *Instead of wasting money on welcoming home undeserving prodigals – how about showing some appreciation for those who have remained faithful slaving away for God all these years?*
- *What about me, father? What about me? When do I get what I deserve? I want justice – and all you do is show extravagant mercy to your loser of a younger son*

An attitude of moral superiority leads to anger and resentment when that moral superiority is not recognized and rewarded

The older brother knew his father's rules, but did not know his father's heart
-the older brother knew nothing of his father's heart for the lost & sinful – nothing of his father's heart of compassion for people with problems and messed-up lives

“Let's wait and see how this guy behaves for awhile before we throw him a party – how do we know that his repentance is genuine and lasting?”

--We don't want to extend grace to someone who may not prove to be worthy of it

- **And that is the problem – the older brothers of this world – the Pharisees and religious legalists and moral guardians of this world – *don't get grace***

- *Prodigals seek mercy for their sins and failures – older brothers and Pharisees seek the just rewards for their upright moral behavior*
- **Prodigals eventually see their lostness and return home in repentance, seeking mercy and grace – and thus experience the Father’s forgiving love**
- *Older brothers and Pharisees are blind to their lostness – blinded by their pride in their goodness and morality and right beliefs and church involvement*
- ***Older brothers and Pharisees are just as alienated from a love relationship with God as prodigals and rebels are – they just can’t see it***

VI. THE OPEN-ENDED CONCLUSION

- We all like happy endings – but this story does not have a happy ending
- *At the end of the story, the rebellious no-good younger son is reconciled with the Father – but the good son // the faithful, obedient older son – is left in his lost, angry, resentful, self-righteous, alienated state*
- *Jesus doesn’t tell us whether he ever accepted his father’s invitation and reconciled with his Father or not – the story is left open-ended*
- Why?
- *Jesus ends the story with the father’s words to the older son because Jesus told the story to the Pharisees and teachers of the law*

Luke 15:1 - 3 (NIV) ¹Now the tax collectors and “sinners” were all gathering around to hear him. ²But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” ³Then Jesus told them this parable:

- **In Jesus’ story, the father represents God**
- *The prodigal son represents the tax collectors and sinners*
- *The older brother represents the Pharisees and the religious teachers*
- *the parable was spoken to Jesus’ critics – who complained that Jesus was too inclusive and accepting of the immoral sinners of that society*
- *Why did Jesus focus so much of his ministry on reaching out to sinners and irreligious people? Why did Jesus welcome immoral sinners into his fellowship?*
- **Because lost people matter to God – because the Father rejoices when prodigals repent and return home to Him – because Jesus came to seek and to save the lost**
- *For prodigals – repentance means leaving a life of sin and rebellion, and returning to the Father and experiencing His love and forgiveness*

- **God loves prodigals and sinners and invites them to partake of the feast of the kingdom of heaven**
- *In Jesus' story, the prodigal son repents, returns home and partakes of the father's extravagant feast*
- *The father celebrates extravagantly because his younger son was dead, and is alive again – he was lost and is found*

- The Father also loves his oldest son – who is also lost – and also needs to repent
- *Not repent of his sinful disobedience – but rather repent of his self-righteous pride, his moral superiority, his anger and resentment, his refusal of grace*
- **God also loves the older brothers and Pharisees of this world and invites them to partake of the feast of the kingdom of heaven**
- *In Jesus' story, the older brother hears the father's invitation, but his response is left open*

- The common wisdom of this world says that heaven is for good people and hell is for bad people
- *Jesus turns that worldly wisdom upside down in this story*
- *Entering the kingdom of heaven is not about being religious or irreligious // moral or immoral // conservative or liberal // church member or unchurched*
- *It's not a matter of the good people are in and the bad people are out*

- **Instead, Jesus teaches: *The humble are in – and the proud are out***
- *God gives grace to the humble but opposes the proud*
- *Those who are humble enough to admit their need of mercy and accept God's grace in Jesus Christ – are in – and those who think they are so good that they don't need God's mercy or refuse God's grace in Jesus Christ – are out*

- **Those who come to the Cross of Jesus Christ and say: *God, have mercy on me, a sinner* – are in**
- *Those who are confident of their own goodness and righteousness and look down on sinners – are out*

- How about you?
- *Have you been living in the far country – far away from God?*
- *Are you willing to turn from your sin and rebellion and stubborn self-will – and come to the Father by way of the Cross of Jesus Christ?*

The Father is waiting to embrace you with His forgiving acceptance

--Don't worry about cleaning up your life first or becoming a church-goer first.

--“*God, have mercy on me a sinner*” is all it takes to begin a relationship with God – if the words come from the heart, and if you put your trust in Jesus Christ to save you from your sins on the basis of his finished work on the Cross
 --*and then allow the risen Lord Jesus Christ to live his life in and through you – to empower you to become the person He created you to be*

- Or perhaps you have been attending church most of your life – doing a good job of following the rules and living a good, responsible, moral life – *but you are not enjoying an intimate love relationship with the Father*
- Are you willing to repent of your self-righteous pride and humble yourself and come to the Cross of Jesus Christ for mercy and grace?
- Or perhaps you came to Christ for salvation a long time ago – and have lived a good, obedient Christian life as an active, responsible church member – *but you have lost touch with the Father’s heart for lost people and can identify with some of the older brother’s attitudes toward sinners*
- Will you repent of those attitudes and ask God to give you something of His heart and His passion for extending love and grace to lost sinners?

Salvation Prayer

“*Majesty*”