

## INTRODUCTION

The parable in this passage focuses on the character and nature of the God of the Bible. It’s usually called the parable of the Prodigal Son but I prefer to call it the parable of the Loving Father. Jesus uses this story to teach us about the character and nature of His Father. It’s no good to believe in God if you believe in the wrong *kind* of God. You can know what God is like by how He responds to a rebellious son in this parable.

I came across something funny the other day I know most of you teenagers will enjoy. It’s called “Seven Things You’ll Never Hear Your Dad Say”:

7. I notice all your friends have a hostile attitude—I like that!
6. Well now that you’re 13, Princess, I want you to start dating older guys.
5. No son of mine is going to live under this roof without an earring!
4. Why do you want to get a job? I’ve got plenty of money for you to spend!
3. Your mother and I are going away for the weekend—you might want to consider throwing a party.
2. Here’s my credit card and the keys to my car—now, GO CRAZY!
1. Well, looks like I’m lost—I guess I’ll have to stop and ask for directions!

One thing you’ll never hear your Heavenly Father say is “If you walk away from Me; you can never come back.” Instead, God is a loving Heavenly Father. He loves you so much, you are free to walk out of fellowship with Him—He won’t stop you. He will run to meet you more than halfway if you decide to return to Him. And He says when you repent; He will treat you as if you never left.

Today, we are going to back up and look at the parable again—this time from the perspective of the rebellious son. Since we read it last week from the NIV, I want us to read it from *The Message* paraphrase:

There was once a man who had two sons. The younger said to his father, Father, I want right now what’s coming to me.” So the father divided the property between them. It wasn’t long before the younger son packed his bags and left for a distant country. There, undisciplined and dissipated, he wasted everything he had. After he had gone through all his money, there was a bad famine all through that country and he began to hurt. He signed on with a citizen there who assigned him to his fields to slop the pigs. He was so hungry he would have eaten the corncobs in the pig slop, but no one would give him any. That brought him to his senses. He said, All those farmhands working for my father sit down to three meals a day, and here I am starving to death. I’m going back to my father. I’ll say to him, Father, I’ve sinned against God, I’ve sinned before you; I don’t deserve to be called your son. Take me on as a hired hand.” He got right up and went home to his father.

When he was still a long way off, his father saw him. His heart pounding, he ran out, embraced him, and kissed him. The son started his speech: “Father, I’ve sinned against God, I’ve sinned before you; I don’t deserve to be called your son ever again.” But the

father wasn't listening. He was calling to the servants, Quick. Bring a clean set of clothes and dress him. Put the family ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Then get a grain-fed heifer and roast it. We're going to feast! We're going to have a wonderful time! My son is here—given up for dead and now alive! Given up for lost and now found!” And they began to have a wonderful time.

What a great story! In just a few short words, Jesus shows us the selfishness and sinfulness of a rebellious son. Charles Dickens once wrote about this parable, “The Prodigal Son is the finest short story ever written.”

It's more than just a splendid short story, however. It's a story that touches all of us at different points. Some of you are the parents of Prodigals and you are feeling the pain of the father. Others of you are like the son who has wandered away from fellowship with the father. Still, others of you won't like to admit it, but you are exactly like the older brother we'll discuss next week.

In this message, we'll examine the steps of the rebellious son. We can learn about the steps away from God and the steps that will take you back to God.

## **I. STEPS AWAY FROM GOD'S BLESSING**

The younger son didn't just wake up one morning in the pig pen. He ended up there by making a series of bad choices and taking a series of bad steps. Remember, he was *always* a child of his father, but he placed himself in a position where the benefits of his father's resources didn't help him anymore. Once you become a child of God, that relationship cannot be cancelled. However, you can disobey your Father and rebel against His will and break fellowship with Him. When you do this, you put yourself in a place where the blessings and benefits of knowing God are no longer yours. If you can identify these bad steps it may help you determine if you need to come back to your Father.

### **1. The first step is a restless attitude**

It can be summarized in the statement, “No fun!” The younger son experienced what all young people feel at one time or another: He got bored with his family life and he had to urge to experience the “real world.” He wasn't having enough fun. This restless spirit caused the son to demand his inheritance and leave home once he got the money. He thought the grass was greener on the other side of the fence, so he had a desire to be “out on his own.” The grass IS greener on the other side of the fence—but you can't afford the water bill!

This restless attitude resides in each of us. It goes by different names. In marriage, it's sometimes called “the seven-year itch” although it itches long before and long after the seven year mark. I've heard husbands and wives speak of feeling “trapped.” They want out because they are afraid they are going to miss out on some pleasure or experience by staying in their boring, old marriage. I don't think any husband or wife just wakes up one morning and decides they are going to be unfaithful or they are going to leave their mate—it always begins with this uncomfortable feeling of restlessness.

Restlessness is the feeling we are missing out on the fun. You can go all the way back to the Garden of Eden and discover this human hunger is what got us in trouble in the first place. Satan told Eve there was a tree, a fruit, a taste she was missing out on. If God was so good, why was He making her miss that taste? It worked.

We all have this tendency. Over 200 years ago, the hymn writer, Robert Robinson spoke for all of us when he wrote: “Prone to wander, Lord I feel it; prone to leave the God I love. Here’s my heart, Lord, take and seal it, seal it for thy courts above.” You need to recognize this dangerous feeling of a restless attitude and resist it like any other temptation. Think about the pain and suffering the younger son would have missed if he had seen this attitude as dangerous and resisted it before he left home. There would be a lot less grief and pain if you could recognize this restlessness and resist it. It’s like a monster in a cage—as long as you keep it in the cage, all it can do is roar at you. But if you let it out of the cage, you are headed for heartache.

## **2. The next downward step is reckless living.**

The younger son let the monster out of the cage, and he was off in a flash. He was tired of his dad’s old rules, so he decided to live by a new philosophy: NO RULES! The Bible simply says “he wasted all his money on wild living.” He bought a flashy new car, new clothes, and he headed to the hot spots to party hard. He turned the CD player up full blast singing, “I’m free! Free riding!” He had a pocketful of money, so now it was party time! Can’t you see the bright lights, the loud music and the late nights? He was going to have fun, fun, fun, ‘till his daddy took his T-bird away—and his daddy wasn’t anywhere around. He ate, he drank, he laughed. In verse 30 the older brother accused him of spending all his money on prostitutes. As long as he was buying the booze, he had plenty of friends!

Finally, he was free! Back home, there had always been rules. His dad had told him some things were wrong and some things were right. Now, he decided “If it feels good—it’s right. If it doesn’t feel good, it’s wrong.” He had his own golden rule—he who has the gold makes his own rules! He was having the time of his life...until he ran out of money.

Some of you have walked away from your heavenly Father because you think you can have more fun following your rules than by following God’s rules. The Bible says there is “pleasure in sin for a season.” That means sin’s pleasure is only temporary—sometimes only momentary. Yeah, there’s the drunken party, but there’s always the hangover. Yeah, there’s the snort of cocaine, but there’s always the habit that grabs you. Sure, there’s the free sex, but there’s the unwanted pregnancy and the disease.

Sin is like a lure fishermen use to entice a big old bass. If you just throw a big, bare hook in the water, no bass is going to eat that. But if it looks pretty, shiny, and resembles something yummy to eat, that old fish will gobble it up. He opens his big mouth expecting a tasty meal, and instead gets the hook—what a surprise! Satan always baits his hooks with the most attractive, tempting bait. But whereas the big-mouthed bass finds the hook right away, Satan will play with you for a long time—weeks and months—before he sets the hook. Is that how you’re living your life? No rules?

### **3. The third step away from God is a ruined life**

When his money ran out, the friends all disappeared. He finds himself in the mud and the manure of a pig sty, starving to death. He had tried it all and now he was singing a new song, "I can't get no satisfaction!"

That's the problem with sin. It never truly satisfies. If you get one high, or one thrill, soon that's not enough so you want something stronger and more thrilling. Sin never satisfies and it eventually leads to suffering. When Jesus added the detail of the son wallowing in the pig pen, we probably just thought "gross." But remember, to the Jews, a pig was a ceremonially unclean animal. I can imagine there was an audible gasp from the crowd when Jesus mentioned the boy was living with pigs and wanting to eat their food. It didn't get any worse than that! He had reached rock bottom. The pig pen represents the ugly, putrid, hideous nature of sin.

He set out to be free, but he soon became enslaved to his own sinful appetites. When you run away from God and live a life of sinful disobedience, you may think you're free, but you are a slave to your own sin. Raynald III was an obscure duke in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century. He reigned in the area we now call Belgium. Raynald had one terrible vice—he loved to eat, and he was extremely obese. There was a revolt in the area led by Raynald's younger brother. The younger brother captured Raynald and had a prison cell built around him. It had no bars on the windows, and no locks on the door, but Raynald was too large to fit through the normal sized door. The younger brother told Raynald when he went on a self-enforced diet and lost enough weight to walk out the door, he would be restored to his wealth and would receive his crown back. But every day, the younger brother had sumptuous meals delivered to the prison room, and Raynald continued to eat. History records Raynald died in the prison cell, a prisoner not of lock and key, but a prisoner to his own appetite. That's how sin ruins you—you become a slave to it. That which had pleasure at the first soon becomes a prison cell at the last.

There is an immutable law of God that says if you sow sin and disobedience you will reap a bumper crop of suffering. Galatians 6:7 says, "Don't be misled: No one makes a fool of God. What a person plants, he WILL harvest."

Through the years, I've known hundreds of Prodigals. They are teenagers and adults who had a loving relationship with God, but they allowed restlessness, and reckless living to enter their lives. They walked away from God's blessings and they end up a mess. Some of them are still there, others have come back home to their Father. That's the good news: you can come back home. You don't have to wait until you reach the pig pen either. At any time, you can decide to return to the blessing and fellowship with your Heavenly Father. Here's how.

## **II. STEPS TO RETURN HOME TO GOD**

If you have wandered away from God and allowed sin to take control of your life, it's not hopeless. The son took three specific steps to return to his father and these are the same three steps you need to take to return to your heavenly Father.

### **1. The first step is to realize!**

In verse 17 Jesus said, He came to his senses.” This is the turning point of the parable. Before you can return to God, you must first realize you are in a mess without Him. Let’s climb down in the pig pen with our boy for a minute. Excuse me Porky, oh, hi, Babe–loved your movie. There’s our boy–covered with the slimy mud and mess of the pig pen. He is so hungry he is tempted to eat the pig food, but he can’t even eat, because the owner of the pigs won’t allow it. He is being treated worse than the pigs. Finally, when he is about as low as you can get, a light bulb comes on in his head. “Click!” Suddenly he looks around and sees himself for who he really is. He looks down and is repulsed by his own filth and dirt. Sin had blinded his eyes, but once the light bulb of realization came on, he could see his life was a real mess. He reached the P.O.T.D. That’s the Point of Total Desperation. He says, “I don’t belong here. I’m made for something better than this. I’m tired of sin, I’m tired of slop; I’m tired of these chains. I want to go home. I want to see my daddy. I miss my mamma’s food. I want to go home.”

God meets people when they realize they are P.O.T.D. Before he reached the POTD, he was proud. His attitude was: “I’ll never go crawling back to my dad and admit I was wrong. I’d sooner die in this pig pen than admit I was wrong.” When you get to the POTD, you stop denying your problem, and you get humble in a hurry.

The only way you can approach God is in humility. King David was a child of God, but he walked away from God’s rules and committed adultery and murder. He hid it for a long time, but finally came to his P.O.T.D., and he repented. He broke down and wept before God and asked Him to forgive him of his wicked behavior. This proud king was a broken, humble man. He makes a powerful observation in the midst of his own brokenness. In Psalm 51:17 he said, “A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”

Let me ask you: What is it going to take for the light bulb to come on in your mind? You may be thinking, “Oh, it’s not so bad for me right now. I’m not really a committed Christian, but I want to go to heaven when I die. But I’m a long way from the pig pen.” That may be true, but you don’t have to wait until you’re P.O.T.D. to return to your Father. Be smart, and come to your senses today and run home to your Father.

## **2. The second step on the road back home is repent!**

After he realized the shame of his situation, the next thing the prodigal son said was, “I have sinned.” In verse 18, he admitted his rebellion was a sin against God. That’s what the Bible calls confession. Confession and repentance are two sides of the same coin. Confession always precedes repentance. When you confess your sin you aren’t notifying God of what you have done–He knows. Confession occurs when you *agree* with God your behavior is sin, and at the same time you display a measure of remorse and regret over your sin. That’s what we hear in his statement, “I have sinned against heaven.”

Next, he is willing to confess to his father he was wrong. All sin is against God and must be confessed to God, and some sin is against another person and must be confessed to that person. The circle of confession should be as large as the circle of the sin–but no larger. You don’t have to confess your sin to me unless you have sinned against me. This sin was against his father, so

that's why he was willing to include his father in the circle of his confession.

Do you see the change in our boy? At the beginning of the story, he was saying, "Give me, give me, give me. Give me my inheritance, give me my freedom." After repenting he was saying, "Make me, make me as one of your hired servants." That's what real repentance is.

But true repentance is not just admitting you are in the pig pen, it means *leaving* the pig pen. Repentance involves more than just feeling regret or remorse over your sin, it is being willing to walk away from your sin and walk back toward God. Repentance means changing your mind about your behavior and then being willing to change your behavior.

Jesus doesn't condemn sin, but He demands repentance. Do you remember the woman who was caught in the act of obedience who was brought before Jesus? They were ready to stone her to death as the law commanded. Jesus said, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone." In a matter of minutes they all dropped their rocks. Jesus was left alone with the woman. He forgave her and sent her on her way with this charge: "Go and sin no more." (John 8:11) Jesus is quick to forgive, but He requires a willingness to repent. Are you willing to admit to God your life is a mess? Are you willing to walk away from your sin? Then you are ready for the final step back to God.

### **3. Return!**

After he came to his senses, and admitted his sin, he was ready for the final step. He said in verse 18, "I will go back." Two of the most powerful words in the human language are, "I will." It was by an act of his will he decided to demand his inheritance to run away from home, and it was by an act of his will he decided to get out of pig sty and head back home. He didn't say, "I'm going to send a letter to my dad to come get me." He knew he and he alone could walk out of the mess and back toward his home.

Can't you picture him? He was prancing and strutting when he left home, but now he was weak, thin, dirty, and humbled. The trip home took a lot longer than the trip away from home. But he had one thought in mind—his home, his father. I can imagine him limping along down a dusty road singing, "I've wandered far away from God; now I'm coming home. The paths of sin, too long I've trod; now Lord, I'm coming home. I've wasted many precious years; now I'm coming home; I now repent with bitter tears; Lord, I'm coming home. Coming home; coming home; never more to roam; Open wide your arms of love, Lord, I'm coming home."

And that's what he found when he got home. His dad came running down the road and he opened wide his arms of love and hugged and kissed him. He put a robe on his back, a ring on his finger, and shoes on his feet. He killed the fatted calf and they began to celebrate.

That's how God will respond to you today if you'll come home to Him. He is inviting you to return to Him. That's really the theme of the entire Bible. God is saying to a lost and sinful humanity, "I love you I want you to return home." Listen to His Word in Joel 2:13: "Rend your heart not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate."

Is that what you need to do today? Do you need to come home to God? In the *Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy was right about one thing: “There’s no place like home; there’s no place like home.” You may be a child of God who’s wandered for years—it’s time to return home. You may need a church home today. We are the Body of Christ, and we open wide our arms to you. Are you tired of wandering? Are you weary and tired of being weary and tired? Jesus said, “Come unto me all of you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28) Will you come home today?

## OUTLINE

### I. STEPS AWAY FROM GOD'S BLESSING

1. Restless attitude...No fun!

2. Reckless living...No rules!

3. Ruined life...No satisfaction!

"Don't be misled: No one makes a fool of God. What a person plants, he WILL harvest." *Galatians 6:7*

### II. STEPS TO RETURN HOME TO GOD

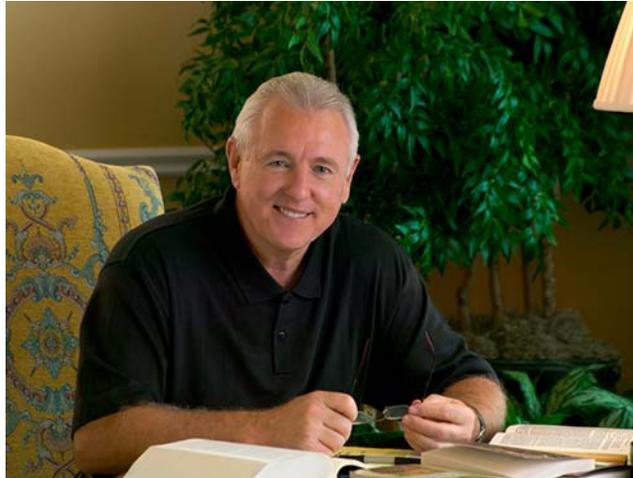
1. Realize! "He came to his senses." (P.O.T.D.)

"A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." *Psalms 51:17*

2. Repent! "I have sinned."

3. Return! "I will go back."

"Rend your heart, not your garments. Return to the Lord your God., for he is gracious and compassionate." *Joel 2:13*



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For the Joy...  
Pastor David Dykes