

Draw Near and Experience the Extravagance of God

Luke 15:11-24

INTRODUCTION

Don't take your eyes off him. Rivet your attention on him. You heard the story read. You saw him in action. You have seen his love. You felt his heart break. If you overlook him, you will miss the whole point of the story. HE is the main character in this little drama. The spotlight never goes off him, even when he is not center stage. He is not the younger son. He is the father.

History has assigned the title "prodigal" to the younger son. And though many of us – myself included – long believed that the word "prodigal" meant something like "evil, dirty, or sinful," the word actually means something altogether different.

Having or giving something on a lavish scale; extravagant, abundant, unrestrained.

The son may have been extravagant to a point, but the only person who is consistently "prodigal" in this story is the father. This familiar text tells the story of our prodigal God. This is the God you meet when you DRAW NEAR to the cross. Observe how extravagant He is:

#1: OUR FATHER GIVES TO HIS CHILDREN EXTRAVAGANTLY

Just like in our society, this younger son had no right to his inheritance until the father died. So his request was the same as saying to his dad "I wish you were dead." Can you imagine the nerve behind such a request?

One day, many years ago, I got a call from my dad. One of my nieces wanted to buy a different car, so she wrote her grandpa (my dad) and asked for an advance on the inheritance she was sure she would receive. Dad was not happy with that request.

He called me to vent about it. When he was ready to hang up, I asked what he planned to do. "I'll let you know," he promised. A few months later he told me he sent her his VISA bill, along with a note that read, "I plan on spending all my money while I'm still living and leaving you kids and grandkids with the bills. If you want to pay your share off now, I'm fine with that." She never responded, and she didn't pay the bill.

The son in our story does not share his plans with the father, but like my niece he came to ask for his share of the inheritance he expected to receive. I am sure this father knew what was in his son's heart. I am sure he knew what would happen if he granted the request. And I am sure it broke his heart to be having that conversation.

But he gave his son what he asked.

What would prompt the father to do that? It is beyond my comprehension from my human perspective. But remember – this father is a picture of God, not me. I would not have been prone to grant this request.

But that's the way God is. He has given to each of us all that we could possibly want.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want (I have everything I need). (Psalm 23:1)

The younger son in our story was lacking nothing. He was well fed, well clothed. He had servants to wait on him, and obviously a father who loved him. But he was not satisfied. He wanted more. And perhaps, most of all, he wanted to leave. He thought he could make it on his own with his father. And he thought he could find the happiness he wanted by pursuing the things that were in his heart.

Sound familiar? That's our story. It's the story of every human being, starting with Adam and Eve's decision to ignore God and eat the apple. Look around you. Even if you are facing challenges right now, you still are incredibly blessed. God has given all of this to us.

There is this thing in the human heart that instinctively wants to push away from God. We want something else. We want more. And despite it all, He has given extravagantly.

#2: OUR FATHER LOVES HIS CHILDREN EXTRAVAGANTLY

Even though the father knew it was a bad decision, he let the son go. The boy wasn't going to Grandma's house. He was leaving – maybe forever.

Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country ... (Luke 15:13)

Distant country. That sounds far away, doesn't it? But you know ... distant countries are not necessarily defined by geography. With all the wonderful technology available to us right now, two people can be halfway around the world from each other and still be close. In the same way, it is possible to share the same bed with your spouse and yet be very, very distant. Distant countries are matters of the heart.

The son's heart left home long before his body did.

It starts with little things first. Then it gradually grows, taking over our thoughts. Before long it shows up in the ways we spend our time and our money. Then it begins to impact our deepest relationships.

Spiritually the distant country involves the little decisions we make ("God won't care if I ..."). We now start to laugh at things we would never have tolerated before.

- We look down on this younger son because he squandered his inheritance.

... there (he) squandered his wealth in wild living. (Luke 15:13)

- But what if your distant country doesn't involve wild living? Instead you squander your potential? Your opportunity to do something good for someone in need? The truth? Your time? Or anything else God has given to you?
- Isn't that the same?

Winston Churchill wrote a book titled "The Far Country" in which the hero was guilty of rejecting his ideals and his dreams. This hero gradually lowered his values and turned away from his conviction of what was right and wrong.

Whenever we substitute anything or anyone other than Jesus to fill the emptiness inside of us, we are living in the distant country.

- The distant country will try to take everything that really matters away from you, just as it did with the younger son.

But notice what the father is doing the entire time his son is gone. The parable paints a picture of the father who is constantly watching the horizon to see if his son is returning.

While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him ... (Luke 15:20)

At no point did this father ever stop loving that child. Not when he was at home. Not when he was in the distant country. His son's lifestyle didn't lessen his love. His son's geographic distance didn't impact it either.

That's what the Scriptures teach us about our God.

Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us. And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. ³⁹No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:35, 37-39, NLT)

Wherever you have been, wherever you are right now, know this to be true: You are loved by God.

#3: OUR FATHER FORGIVES HIS CHILDREN EXTRAVAGANTLY

Now the parable turns its attention back to the father who has been patiently waiting for this very moment. Can't you picture him? Standing there on the porch, looking across the fields, hoping that the next shadow that appears will be the shadow of his son.

And then it happens.

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. (Luke 15:20)

In biblical times – and well beyond – it was considered “undignified” for an older man to run in public. The great Aristotle taught this too:

Great men never run in public. (Aristotle)

But this father didn't care. He tucked his tunic in his belt and raced to meet him. What a picture! In my imagination I see him jumping and whooping and hollering as he sidesteps mud puddles and high fives all the servants he passes. He doesn't run down the sidewalk. No, he takes the direct path, climbing over the fences and racing across the field.

This is your God! Whenever someone turns from the distant land and starts back home, he is so eager to forgive ...

He runs!

His forgiveness was immediate, complete and filled with joy.

This parable is the third in Luke 15 with the same theme. The previous two end with a variation of this line:

There will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent. (Luke 15:7)

No matter what you have done, your God is eager to forgive.

APPLICATION

When the great American storyteller Mark Twain was asked, “Who do you think is the best storyteller every lived?” he answered without hesitation: “Jesus Christ.”

His interviewer was surprised, not expecting a religious answer. So he switched the topic: “Which story is the greatest story ever told?” This time Twain replied, “The Story of the Prodigal Son.”

Mark Twain never explained why he thought that was so. But let me give you my opinion. This is the greatest story because it is the story of every person who has ever lived.

- We all push away from our God and head toward the distant country.
- We all – I believe – will come to understand that the things we thought would satisfy us, don't. Ultimately we all discover there is something missing.

- And some of us will decide to go home. To go back to our extravagant God where we will experience all that He wants to give us, know firsthand the depth of His love for us, and learn what it means to be fully forgiven.

Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. (James 4:8)

He will run.

Amen.