

The Prodigal Father

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Prayer: Hungry For God Series

Luke 15:11-24

Of all the extraordinary changes in American life over the past 40 years, among the most important social change is the decline of fatherhood. There is one single statistic that captures the radical change in American society right now. In 1960 9% of children lived apart from their biological fathers. By the year 2000 that percentage, driven by divorce and out of wedlock pregnancies, has more than quadrupled to almost 40%. And among children of divorce, 40% of those children do not see their dads in a typical year. It is impossible to overstate the scope of the social change that's taken place in America and its meaning for our country.

If you go back in time to 1960, the year that I turned 5, back in 1960 because of falling death rates and low divorce rates, more children lived with both of their natural parents than at any time in world history. For those of you who are in your 40's and 50's, it was simply a very unusual thing to have a friend in the 1960's who lived with only one of their parents. Looking back to my first 10 years, I can only recall 2 close friends who lived only with their mothers. One friend's dad died when we were in the 4th grade. Another friend's parents got divorced when we were in 3rd grade. Everyone thought that was rather scandalous and it was the gossip of our street. The vast, vast majority of families were intact in the 1950's and early 1960's across all ethnic and racial lines.

Today it doesn't matter what social class, or ethnicity, or area of town you live in. It doesn't matter what church a person attends, or what the theology of the church is. Every segment of our society and every church is hugely impacted by the epidemic of divorce and out of wedlock pregnancies and the loss fatherhood.

Lawrence Stone, who is a very prominent family historian from Princeton University said, "The scale of marital breakdowns in the west since 1960 has no historical precedent that I know of. There has been nothing like it for the last 2000 years."

Wade Horn, of the National Fatherhood Initiative, said that the greatest social tragedy of the last 30 years has been the collapse of fatherhood.

There is one label that can be placed upon the generations born after 1970. That label is the "fatherless generation." Now, I want to immediately say that I'm not in any way uniquely blaming men for the breakdown of marriages. Women today, in fact, initiate the majority of divorces. I've met many men who desperately wanted to save their marriages and desperately wanted to be with their kids.

They were absolutely stymied in their efforts by unyielding wives and inequitable court systems. Sin is an equal opportunity employer. As many women and wives and mothers are sinners as you will find among men, fathers, and husbands. The legal system has contributed a great deal to the epidemic of fatherlessness.

But whatever the reasons for the absence of fathers in the home, it is fatherlessness that sociologists and criminologists point to as the ultimate source of almost all the social pathologies we have experienced in America over the last 40 years. David Popenoe, a well known sociologist wrote this a few years ago: *In my many years as a sociologist, I have found few other bodies of evidence that lean so much in one direction as this one: on the whole, two parents—a father and a mother—are better for a child than one parent. There are, to be sure, many factors that complicate this simple proposition. We all know of a two-parent family that is truly dysfunctional—the proverbial family from hell. A child can certainly be raised to a fulfilling adulthood by one loving parent, who is wholly devoted to the child's well being. But such exceptions do not invalidate the rule any more than the fact that some 3-pack a day smokers live to a ripe old age casts doubt on the dangers of cigarettes. The collapse of children's well being in the United States has reached breathtaking proportions.*

Juvenile violent crime has increased six-fold from 16,000 arrests in 1960 to 96,000 in 1992, a period in which the total number of young people in the population remained relative stable. Reports of child-neglect and abuse have quintupled since 1976. Eating disorders and rates of depression have soared among adolescent girls. Teen suicide has tripled. Alcohol and drug abuse among teenagers, although it is leveled off in recent years, continues at a high rate. Scholastic aptitude tests scores have declined nearly 80 points and most of the decline cannot be accounted for by the increased academic diversity of students taking the tests.

Poverty has sifted from the elderly to the young. Of all the nation's poor today, 38% are children. One can think of many explanations for these unhappy developments: the growth of commercialism and consumerism, the influence of television and mass media, the decline of religion, the widespread availability of guns and addictive drugs, and the decay of social order and neighborhood relationships. None of these causes should be dismissed. But the evidence is now strong that the absence of fathers from the lives of children is one of the most important causes.

I wonder how many of you, or your children, have been impacted by the social epidemic of fatherlessness? Now, simply having a father, of course, is no guarantee that we'll grow up whole, emotionally or spiritually healthy. Some fathers are abusive. Some fathers are mentally ill. Some fathers are addicts. Some fathers are emotionally absent. They are there, but they're really not there. Some fathers are physically absent through workaholism.

Even good fathers are not perfect. Good fathers make mistakes. Good fathers say stupid things. Good fathers emotionally disconnect. Good fathers can be selfish and neglectful and exasperate their children.

Here's the question: How can the fatherless generations, born since 1970, and those of us who have been raised by seriously dysfunctional fathers and the rest of us raised by good dads, who weren't perfect, ever hope to meet the hole that's been left in our souls for a perfect father?

Today, as I continue my series on prayer, I want to talk about the perfect father—a perfect father that we can pray to, and communicate with, and have communion with. I've called today's talk "The Prodigal Father." Let's pray.

As a foundation for this series on prayer, I've tried to alter your definition of prayer and the ideas that you associate with prayer. Now this is going to take weeks to do because many of our ideas and associations are deeply engrained in us. But as I've been saying over the last few weeks prayer should not come to us as a test, or a standard that we often fail to meet. That's the way it is for most Christians. We feel ashamed about our prayer life. We think it is a standard that we must meet.

Or, prayer becomes a burdensome obligation, something I should do, but I really don't want to do because it is not really very refreshing and it's not very much fun. Worst of all, prayer becomes a spiritual merit badge. We check off the box for today's date and we say: Today I had my devotional time, therefore, I am now acceptable to God and I'm acceptable to myself and I've proved to other people that I'm a good Christian.

I painted a word picture the first week of the series of a man adrift in a boat in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. I said prayer is like that man in the boat. Prayer is food for a starving man. Prayer is drink for a thirsty man. Prayer is direction for a lost man.

Last week, in a message I titled "Coming Home to Our Father" the word picture I painted of prayer was prayer is simply coming home from a distant country. We talked about a man who had been a hostage in Lebanon for five years and finally came home to his family. Prayer is that experience of coming home when we've been in a distant country, a country of ambition and greed, a country of lust and pride, a country of weariness and exhaustion.

But today I want to build on last week's teaching. I'm going to define prayer today as communication and communion with our Prodigal Father in heaven. Jesus' favorite way to reveal God to us was to call God Father. More than anything else, the way Jesus spoke of his relationship to God in heaven, and the

way that Jesus taught us that we should relate to God in heaven is that God in heaven is our father, our Abba.

The New Testament scholar, Jeremias, has written extensively about the uniqueness and novelty of Jesus' teaching. He said that he has "examined the prayer literature of ancient Judaism and in no place in this immense literature is the invocation of God as Abba to be found. Abba was an everyday word, a homely family word. No Jew would have dared to address God in this manner. Jesus did it always and authorizes his disciples to repeat the word 'Abba' after him." Prayer is communication and communion with your Abba Father, with your heavenly Daddy.

Jesus told us the story about a son running from his Abba father. We considered the story last week. Let's look at it again. Verse 11-16,

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Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. 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. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything."

Jesus is telling us a story about the squandering of one's gifts and the descent of the younger son to the very depths of degradation. The son's story is a story that many of us know. It is many of our own stories. A few of us can see ourselves, or see people we love, some of us can see our own children in the story of the lost son. When we venture away from our Abba father's house at the beginning it is great. It is enjoyable. We're having a good time. It is fun to explore the freedom that we've never been able to have in our father's house.

But after the celebration of a little bit of freedom, a sense of unease usually sets into a person as there are signs all around us that remind us of our father. The Bible says, "In him we live and move and have our being." It is impossible to avoid bumping into God. CS Lewis said, "An atheist can't be too careful!" Maybe someone starts talking to us about God at work. Or you are sitting in a coffee shop and the people at the next table are loudly talking about the wonderful answer they got to prayer, or a passage that they've been reading in their bibles. Maybe as we're flipping through the stations on television, there is someone on TV talking about repentance. Or maybe you are driving down the road and there is a church sign that reads: "Turn from your wicked ways." In the condition we are in as we're running from the father's house, that sign comes to us like a lightening bolt from the sky. And so we have to run further and engage ourselves

in even more diversions in order to keep thoughts of our father far from our minds.

There is a reason why Christian young people and most Christian adults who are on the run from the father, sometimes go to greater extremes in their behavior than non-Christian people. Christian young adults, and Christian older adults, who have been around the father, who have experienced something of their Abba father, when they run from the father's house cannot allow themselves a moment of reflection, a moment of contemplation where they think of the father. Because if they allow themselves to think deeply, to stop running, then their whole game is up.

So when we run from the father's house, we have to intensify the diversions, the stimulations, the merry-go-round of activity and relationships. And it may not be the typical things we think about—drinking, sex, or smoking pot. People get into those things, but the diversion may simply be plunging yourself into decorating your house. Have you ever watched someone whose life is just consumed with home decoration?

“Well, now we’re working on the master bedroom. Jim and I have spent hours and hours selecting the right colors for our room and the crown molding. I tell you, I have just exhausted myself picking fabrics for the bedspreads and going antiquing for just the right end table. After that, we’re going to do the guest bathroom. We just hate the current placement of the toilet in the guest bathroom and so we’re going to rip it all out. It just never stops.”

Why so much concentration and this insane attention to home decoration?

“Well, we’ve just picked out the prettiest tile for the bathroom.”

Why do we do that? Because if we stop our thoughts might drift to God our Father and we might have to change everything.

“Well, we just bought ourselves a boat. And we won’t only divert ourselves with our golf game, we’ll divert ourselves with our new boat.”

Friend, all diversions are not necessarily partying. It is not all debauchery. It may be that a person who is running from the father is a person who has plunged themselves entirely into work or building their businesses for years. Running from the father's house may be your working 70 hours a week, week in and week out. And there is just no room in your life for communication or communion with Abba father.

Do any of you recognize yourself in any of this? Any of you on a merry-go-round of diversion? Even Christian ministry, or being exceptionally busy for God can be a diversion from actually building a relationship with God your Father. All of it

boils down to not giving yourself a moment's rest because once you do, you recognize that you are completely hollowed out inside. You never allow yourself to stop and consider how low your plane is really flying. You get used to flying at such a low level.

Have you been there? Are you there now? Are you a person who has simply gotten used to a virtual non-relationship in your marriage? You've simply gotten used to total disrespect from your child or living like a non-Christian, except when you go to church? Have any of you gotten used to having almost no prayer life at all? You never drink deeply from God's well. Every once in a while you take a tiny sip of water and that's what you live on. But you don't really taste and see that the Lord is good.

Are any of you flying at such a low level that you have almost no intimate contact with God at all? No awareness of what God may be saying to you, or doing?

We can get so used to flying at such a low level and in this decline and over stimulation, this pursuit of diversion, this squandering of wealth, it says in verse 15,

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So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

What a fitting way to describe addiction. Here is a man who had to attach himself to someone else. Here is a man who had to know himself to something else to someone else. There is no complete freedom. We either commit ourselves to God our father and yield ourselves to him in surrender, or we bring into our lives a thousand other taskmasters. If ever there was a picture of addiction, here it is. The young man attaches himself to a citizen of that country, who sends him into the field to feed pigs.

The Jews used to have a list of dishonorable professions. In fact, there were professions that a woman was permitted to divorce her husband for, if he was involved in one of those professions. Under rabbinical law, if your husband was a dung collector, you could divorce him. But there was nothing more dishonorable than being a pig farmer. This would be an impossibility for a Jew. It reminds me that while this man was feeding the pigs, hanging around the Gentiles, he found himself doing things he never thought he would do.

Has that ever happened to you? You were suddenly doing something, or involved in something, or saying something that you in the past had said: "there's no way I would ever sink to that level. There's no way I could ever do that." You weren't raised that way. This thing is contrary to all your values, everything you believe. Maybe you are a woman who was raised in a Christian

family, you've been around church, and yet you got an abortion. That's part of your history.

Or you are a college student or young adult who was raised in a good family with good morals and you find yourself laying in bed at night next to a man (or a woman) staring into the darkness thinking to yourself: how in the world did this ever happen to me? Mom and dad warned me. They talked with me. This is contrary to everything I was raised with.

Have you ever found yourself involved in something you never thought you would be involved with? He cycles down all the way to the point where this young man wants to eat the pods that the pigs were eating. He had this unfulfilled longing for garbage. You can get yourself so addicted that the longing in your soul is no longer for God, but you are lusting and longing after garbage—perverted sexuality, the wrong relationship, this drug.

So the story goes on and says in verse 17,

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When he came to his senses, he said, “How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.” So he got up and went to his father.

Here in verse 17-20 we see the determination on the part of the son to return. It says: He came to his senses. Literally, it says: “He came to himself.” He awoke as from a dream. He had been spending all of this time diverting himself, stimulating himself, running, keeping all of this activity going, purchasing, shopping, partying, making sure that in all the busyness all the thoughts of his father could intrude in on his mind.

Well, somehow the cloud that was over his mind passed and he determined to go back home.

Now, I want to make one simple point here. What is it that draws us back? This little paragraph, by the way, is a perfect picture of the nature of repentance. But what is it that causes us as men or women to actually change the whole way we're living life? What is it that causes us to repent when we've been cycling down for a long time, when we've gotten ourselves attached to something? We're in bondage and we're experiencing confusion. What is it that makes a man or woman actually change the whole way they've been living when their plane has been flying really low for a long time? We've just gotten used to scraping bottom. What is it that causes us to pull back on the controls and fly higher?

I want to tell you what it is not. There is a popular myth that says a man or woman will change the way they're living when they hit bottom. When they get so sick of themselves and sick of their condition, they say: "I'm going to change."

I don't think repentance is produced by just hitting bottom, just getting sick of you. You can be sick of yourself for years and just keep repeating the same behaviors. You can be absolutely disgusted with yourself. You can be distraught with your behaviors. We can be confused about why we keep doing the same thing over and over and never change. You can cry. You can be in pain. You can be filled with self-loathing and self-hatred, but never get out of the pigpen.

It is not hitting bottom friends that causes a person to change. It is not getting fed-up with yourself that causes you to change. You make New Year's resolutions based on being sick and tired of yourself. In fact, many people hit bottom and they keep on digging. There are many folks who have said, "Well, if I ever got to this point, I'll definitely stop." But when we're away from Abba father, we not only lose sight of God, but we lose sight of ourselves. We lose any sense of what we could be. We lose any hope for anything better. We wallow in our lostness. When we lose touch with God, we say to ourselves, "I am worthless. I am no good. I am unlovable."

What changes a person? It is not hitting bottom. Some of us have hit bottom in our marriages, in our dating, in our sexuality, in our addictions, in our vocations, and we've either just laid down there in the pig pen, or we kept digging.

Henri Nouwen, who wrote an extraordinary little book, that I referred to last week, titled *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, wrote these words:

I realized that this choice of either life or death is always before me. Constantly I am tempted to wallow in my own lostness and lose touch with my original goodness, my God-given humanity, my basic blessedness. And thus allow the powers of death to take charge. This happens over and over again when I say to myself: "I am no good. I am useless. I am worthless. I am unlovable. I am a nobody."

There are always countless events and situations that I can single out to convince myself and others that my life is just not worth living, that I am only a burden, a problem, a source of conflict, or an exploiter of other people's time and energy. Many people live with this dark, inner sense of themselves. In contrast to the Prodigal, they let the darkness absorb them so completely that there is no light left to turn toward and return to. They might not kill themselves physically, but spiritually they are no longer alive. They have given up faith in their original goodness, and, thus, also in their father who has given them their humanity.

What changes us is the grace of God that reveals the father to us. Like rays of sunlight breaking through the clouds on a gray day, thoughts of God our father

start breaking in to our minds. When a man comes to his senses, what breaks through the clouds is not just the recognition of his own condition. What breaks through the clouds are thoughts about his father's face, and his father's home. What changes us is that the thought breaks in where we begin to believe: I could live in my father's home again. The idea comes to our minds: I could be different. I don't have to fly this low in my marriage, my dating, my lifestyle, or in my Christian life. We begin to get the thought: I could be better than I am right now. I don't have to live this way. I could experience for myself the love of the father.

Always, always what changes us ultimately is the revelation of the Father. Your sin will never appear to you awful enough to drive you to change. But if you let thoughts of God your father break in, and if you don't run from those thoughts, if you just stop for a moment and allow yourself to believe that you have a father in heaven who loves you, you have a father in heaven who is waiting for you, you have a father in heaven who longs to be generous to you and give you a better life, then you will change. When you allow yourself to believe that you could have so much more if you were in relationship with your father in heaven, a deep, abiding relationship with him, you would change.

This is, by the way, what drives us to pray and to persevere in prayer. Need alone may cause a person in the hospital room to pray or ask for prayer, but need alone won't cause a person to persevere in prayer. And when the need passes, so does the prayer. Lots of people have had extraordinary experiences in hospital rooms, or they've been in crisis professionally. A relative is in crisis and so they pray. But continuing in prayer, persevering in prayer to the point where we really develop a relationship with God won't happen until there is a revelation of God the Father's love for you, you won't change the way you pray.

So who is our Abba father in heaven? I call the father in this parable the prodigal father. People have, for years, called the parable the "Parable of the Prodigal Son." This story is better titled "The Prodigal Father." For those of you who have been in the church for several decades and heard me teach on this parable, you've heard me repeatedly title it "The Prodigal Father." Prodigal does not mean lost, or debased, or disobedient, or sinful. Prodigal literally means extravagant, lavish, unrestrained, almost wasteful.

Who is Abba father? Attach this word "prodigal;" attach this concept of extravagant generosity to your thoughts of God. Here's the absolute opposite end of the spectrum from stingy or tightfisted. He is prodigal. He is prodigal in his gifts. In this story, we read in verse 11,

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Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

Do you think that this father was deceived? Perhaps he thought: "My son will build a business right next to me. He just needs a bit of support, some starter money, a little step up and he will be responsible." Do you think his father was self-deceived, deluded that his son would be thankful? This time my son will do the right thing. Do you think the father was deceived about the son's character? Do you think he didn't really know his son?

When you read that the father decided to divide the estate and give this large sum of money to his son, do you think that father was just an eternal optimist? "Well, yes, my son's track record has been a disaster. Money just runs through his fingers. He is totally self-indulgent. My son can't say no to himself. But this time, he's going to invest my money wisely. He's going to use it to advance himself. He's going to use it to advance my interests."

The father wasn't deceived about his son's character. This story is not about a son who finally earns his father's respect. My son has proven himself and now I'm going to trust him with money. This story is about the father's extravagant generosity to a son who doesn't deserve it.

Have you ever been amazed, in fact stretched beyond your limits concerning God's prodigality in giving gifts? Jesus tells us in Matt. 5:43-45,

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You have heard it said, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

Our father in heaven, as the Creator of every human being, the Creator of every man, woman and child, gives creation gifts to everyone whether they are worthy or not. Our father in heaven gives creation gifts to everyone whether they are in relationship to him or not. Theologically, this giving of creation gifts is called "common grace." Common grace is the grace of God, which he gives to people as countless blessings that are not part of salvation. They are common because they are common to all people, not just believers in Christ, not just followers of Christ. It rains on the crops of the just and the unjust alike. Food, rain, intelligence, artistic ability, and the gift of a sense of humor, beauty – these are all part of the prodigal blessings of God. It is the common grace given to humanity regardless of a person's character or relationship to the Father.

You must have noticed that people can be attractive, funny, or have a great personality, people can have a winning smile and be incredibly nice, folks can have great intelligence wholly apart from whether they are Christian believers.

And have you noticed that God is extravagantly generous to people who don't deserve it? In fact, sometimes God is so generous that it offends our sense of justice. We want common grace to be less common. Just think about the athletic world. Kurt Warner is a wonderful Christian man and yet he is currently struggling as a quarterback for the NY Giants. Jon Kitna is a wonderful Christian man and he playing second string QB for the Bengals right now. Dustin Fox is a wonderful Christian young man and he just broke his arm. He won't likely be playing for OSU this year.

And then you have the biggest loudmouths, the showboating self-focused, arrogant, swaggering football player and that person could theoretically catch three touchdown passes. This offends us. Don't be so generous, Father.

But our Father in heaven says: Everybody gets my creation gifts. It is common grace. "I give it to all. Hey, you, over there. Yes, you...the drunken loudmouth. I'm going to have your business prosper. And I'm going to give you amazingly talented children."

Who are we going to when we pray? We're going to a God who is prodigal in his patience. Helmut Thielicke, who was a wonderful German preacher of the last generation, and one of my favorite authors, titled this story, "The Waiting Father." What an incredible way to describe God's heart towards us. That Abba Father is a waiting father. Our father waits for us to return to him. What do we find the father in this story doing for the first half of the chapter? The father is waiting—waiting for his son to return home. He is waiting for his son to give his heart back to him.

Friend, have you ever thought to yourself that the answer to the question: where is God now? Is that God is waiting for you to turn to him? The Bible says that God is patient with us. We read in 2 Peter 3:9,

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The Lord is not slow in keeping his promises, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

Over and over as part of the old covenant established with Moses, we read about the character of God. Here is what we read in Exodus 34:6-7,

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And he [God] passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "the Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, *slow to anger*, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.

Has the Father's prodigal patience ever gotten to you? There are times when the thought of my father's patience has broken my heart as I've thought about how many times I've wounded and grieved God with the same issues. The Father is always there and is always patient with me. I think about Jesus' words of lament as he looked over the city of Jerusalem and said in Mt. 23:

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O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often have I longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.

That's how God your father feels towards you. How often he has wanted to gather you to himself. Our father in heaven is absolutely prodigal in his patience. He is prodigal in his long suffering. He is prodigal in his longing for us.

Who are we turning to when we pray? We are turning to our Abba Father, who is prodigal in his gift of forgiveness. In Luke 15:21-24 we read,

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The son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father 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." So they began to celebrate.

The son tries to confess. After we have cycled down and tried to divert ourselves from the father's presence through a million diversions; after we have given ourselves to attachments that are not God's will for us; after we have come to our senses, we often try to strategize about how to come back to God. Sometimes we say to ourselves: Well, if I'm going to come back to God, then I have to come back making all these resolutions. We believe that the way home to our father is through us resolving to read our Bible every day. I'm going to resolve to be involved in this or that activity. I'm going to promise to God that I won't be involved in that type of relationship again.

But the moment we turn back, God cuts off our lengthy confession, our resolutions, and our vows. Our Father in heaven says, "Quick! Bring the best robe..." In other words, "Enough! Stop it!"

Why so quick, God, in your forgiveness? Why so prodigal? Why so extravagant? Why not wait and check the son out to see if he would live out his new resolution? Say to the son, "Son, I'm glad you came home, but I need to check you out. We're going to have to spend the next year putting you through a thorough going examination. If you are able to live up to certain requirements, then I will forgive you."

But the father doesn't do that. The son turns back and immediately the Father showers him with forgiveness. Why so quick, Father? I say this with all reverence. But sometimes, God my father, reminds me of a really bad card player, where you can see what's in his hand. You say: "Chest your cards, God. I can see what's in your hand." You say: "Father, hold your cards a little closer to the vest. Don't tell people right off the bat that when they turn to you, they will be immediately and completely forgiven because people will take advantage of you, Father. People will abuse your forgiveness. People will abuse grace. Keep them guessing."

The Father holds his cards out. He says: "Let me show you what's in my hands. Forgiveness, wild abundant forgiveness."

Why does God display forgiveness so openly? I believe it is for this reason. Because if God did not display it, we would not go back. If any of us had to wonder what kind of reception we would get if we turned back to the Father, we would never go back. We would stay at arm's length. We might come to church. We might resolve to be moral. But we'd never go back to the Father's house and into real relationship with the Father, if we had to guess what was in his hand. But he shows us what is in his hand—forgiveness, prodigal, extravagant, complete, total forgiveness for all of your sins when you turn back to the Father.

Who are we coming to when we pray to the Father? Last thing, we're going to someone who is prodigal in his generosity in Christ. It says in Ephesians 1:7-8 these words:

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In him [that is in Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.

Over and over again when the apostle Paul speaks about grace in his letters, he uses superlatives. He speaks about the riches of his grace. Paul writes of abundant grace, overflowing grace. It was the experience of the prodigal extravagant grace of God in Jesus Christ that drove the apostle Paul across land and sea. It was this experience of the prodigal grace of God in Jesus Christ that made Paul preach night and day and pray continually. It was the experience of the prodigal grace of God in Jesus Christ that enabled Paul to keep going in the face of beatings, stonings, and imprisonment, mocking, and rejection, hunger, and shipwrecks. Extravagant, overflowing, abundant, wave after wave of grace.

That's what the New Testament message is. There is a Passover time in Jewish families, a popular Hebrew song that we Jewish people sing at the Passover Seder. The song is title Dyanu. It means, "It would have been sufficient. It would have been enough for us." The song recounts the grace of God towards

the Jewish people in the exodus event. And as God's grace and activity is recounted, the refrain is: It would have been sufficient, but God did more. And so the song says:

If God had only freed us from Egypt,
It would have been sufficient.
But he did more. He split the Red Sea.
If God had only split the Red Sea,
It would have been sufficient. Dyanu.
But God did more. He gave us manna in the wilderness to feed us.
If God had only given us manna,
It would have been sufficient.
But he did more. He gave us water in the wilderness.
If God had only given us water,
It would have been sufficient.
But he did more. He gave us the Law.
If God had only done that,
It would have been sufficient.
But then he did more – Dyanu.

And friend, as you think about the riches you have in Christ, the only thing you could say in Hebrew would be “dyanu.”

When you come to Christ, you receive the forgiveness of your sins, full forgiveness, free forgiveness, complete forgiveness, total forgiveness. If God had only forgiven us our sins in Christ, dyanu – it would have been sufficient. But God did more. God reconciled us to himself. He not only wiped the slate of our past clean, but he reconciled us to himself. He says to us: “You are now my friends.” Beyond forgiveness, God calls you “friend.” Dyanu. That would have been sufficient.

But more than friend, God adopts us into his family as his sons and daughters. He calls us “beloved children.” And if he'd only adopted us into his family, dyanu. That would have been sufficient. But he gives us the gift of assurance that we know that we know that we are loved by our Father in heaven. And if he had only given us assurance, dyanu. That would have been sufficient. But he gives us access to the throne of grace. We can come to him with requests and prayers. And we can find mercy in his presence. And if he had only given us access, we would say dyanu. That would be sufficient.

But he gives us power to live right now. Power to change by giving us the gift of the Holy Spirit. And if he had only given us the gift of the Holy Spirit, dyanu. That would have been sufficient. But he gives us a foretaste of the kingdom of God right now. To each of his children he gives a present taste of what it's going to be like to experience the kingdom of God later in heaven. And if he had only given us a foretaste, we would say, dyanu. That would be sufficient. But he

promises us a future kingdom, and he promises us rewards, and he promises us that one day we are going to see his face. And we will say on that day, "Dyanu." It is sufficient.

The Prodigal Father, that's who you're going to when you pray. Let's pray.

The Prodigal Father

Rich Nathan

September 18-19, 2004

Prayer: Hungry For God Series

Luke 15:11-24

I. The Fatherless Generation

II. The Lost Children

- A. Squandering Our Inheritance (Lk. 15:13)
- B. Diverting Ourselves
- C. Sliding Into Slavery (Lk. 15:15, 16)
- D. Remembering the Father (Lk. 15:17-20)

III. The Prodigal Father

- A. Prodigal in His Gifts (Lk. 15:11,12; Mt. 5:43-45)
- B. Prodigal in His Patience (2 Pt. 3:9; Ex. 34:6,7)
- C. Prodigal in His Forgiveness (Lk. 15:20-24)
- D. Prodigal in His Generosity in Christ (Eph. 1:7,8)
- E. Prodigal in His Answers to Prayer (Mt. 7:7-11)