

Coming Home to God Our Father

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Prayer: Hungry for God Series

Luke 15:1-7; 11-24

I don't know how many of you are familiar with the name Terry Waite. Terry Waite was an Anglican church official and an advisor to Robert Runcie, who was the Archbishop of Canterbury. In that capacity, Terry Waite successfully negotiated for the release of British hostages in Iran in 1981 and Libya in 1985.

In 1987 while he was negotiating for the release of American hostages in Beirut taken by the Islamic terrorist group Hezbollah, Terry Waite himself was taken prisoner. He was held hostage in Lebanon for five years. Following his release, he continued his church work and he wrote his autobiography titled *Taken On Trust: An Autobiography*.

For five years, Terry Waite occupied a dark cell in Beirut. He writes: *I was chained to a wall by my hands and feet. I was beaten on the soles of my feet with cable and denied all my human rights and contact with my family and given no access to the world. The hardest thing for a prisoner in those conditions is the uncertainty. You don't know what's going to happen to you next. You have no rights, no one to speak to, no one to advise you, no one to fall back on.*

For four years I was kept in solitary confinement and had no companionship at all. I was always blindfolded, or had to wear a blindfold when someone came in the room. I never saw another human being. I never had any exercise in the whole period. I had to get what exercise I could while chained to the wall. I had five minutes a day to go to the bathroom; for the rest of the time I had to use a bottle. What was most difficult was that I had no contact with my family for five years. They didn't know whether I was alive or dead for about four years until the news got to them from another hostage.

One of the most wonderful things that happened was during the last six months of my captivity. I was given a small radio. I listened to BBC World Service continually. And a cousin of mine broadcast on my birthday my favorite piece of Bach's organ music, which he said was a gift from my family. It was a great source of hope and comfort to me to have some communication from home however small.

When Terry Waite was finally released, he was flown to an air force base in England. He said, *I stumbled through a glass doorway and stared. My son, who was a teenager when I was captured, had now grown up so much that I didn't recognize him. Jillian, my youngest daughter ran to me, leaped into my arms*

and we both wept together. Then my whole family moved forward. We wept as we embraced each other. That's when I knew I was home.

I began a series on prayer last week. In these two introductory talks to my series, I want to attempt to change your mind about what prayer is because I think even followers of Christ are confused about prayer. We treat prayer as a test we failed or a spiritual standard that we haven't met. So many of us feel ashamed about the quality of our prayer life. Someone comes up to us and asks: "how are you doing in your devotions? What has God been saying to you recently in your prayers?" We hang out heads and say: "Well, I just haven't been doing very well in prayer." We failed to meet the standard. We failed the test.

Or we treat prayer as a burdensome obligation that we ought to perform, but we haven't. "I know I should pray; I know I ought to pray; but it is just one more obligation."

Worst of all of our misconceptions is prayer as a badge of holiness, a badge of pride. Prayer becomes a way that we prove to God or other people that we really are good Christians.

Last week I tried to give you a word picture of what prayer is. The word picture we used last week was of a man dying of thirst, who finally has the opportunity to drink. A man starving to death, who finally has the opportunity to eat. Prayer is not something we have to do; prayer is something we get to do. It is not an obligation it is a privilege. Prayer is water for the thirsty man, food for the hungry man.

Let me give you another word picture of what prayer is. Prayer is coming home from a far country to be with your father in heaven. Prayer is the recognition that we have been away from God. That we've been traveling in a far away country, or like Terry Waite, we have been held captive in a distant country, a country of bondage and addiction, a country of remorse and anger. We have been living in a country of fear and anxiety. We have been traveling for days or months, or years in a country of our own lusts and other people's conditional love. In prayer we respond to the father's invitation to come home.

Prayer is hearing the father's invitation: "Son, daughter, stop keeping yourself away from me. Stop living in a distant country. Come home. Come home to my forgiveness. Come home to my affirmation. Come home to my acceptance. Come home to my unconditional love."

I've called today's talk, Coming Home to God Our Father. Luke 15:1-7; 11-24.

Jesus in Luke 15 actually tells two parables about coming home. There are three stories about being lost, and there are two parables specifically about coming home. You ask: "Why should I pray?" And the answer typically given in most churches is: "You should pray because prayer is a duty laid upon Christians. You should imitate the example of Jesus and the apostles and other holy men and women throughout church history who prayed."

We ourselves have lots of motives for praying. One of our chief motives for praying is to get things from God that we can't produce in our own strength. We want to be free from the burden of a guilty conscience. We can't deal with our guilt, so we go to God for forgiveness. We have needs that go beyond our capacity to meet. For example, we have tried everything we know to do to conceive a child. We've gone to fertility specialists. We've taken hormone treatments. We've measured our body temperature. We've read all the literature. But we still can't conceive, so we pray.

We've tried everything we know to do to reconcile a relationship. We've written letters. We've made phone calls. We've tried to apologize. But nothing's worked, and so we pray.

We have tried to get a job a million different ways. We've rewritten our resume over and over again. We've used up all of our contacts and all of our relational equity and we still don't have the job that we want. So we pray.

All over the world, for all of recorded history, people pray when they reach the limits of human capacity. There is a drought and local people can't produce rain, so they pray. There is a war and the people who are being crushed by the war can't protect their own lives, so they pray. Someone is an addict. They can't overcome their addiction in their own strength. And so they pray.

It is not only our own needs that we pray about. People that we love have needs that go beyond our capacity to meet. A loved one may be sick in the hospital. Someone we care about is facing a very aggressive form of cancer. We pray for them. A loved one's marriage is on the rocks and nothing we say, and nothing anyone else says, is helping. So we pray. We read about our Christian brothers and sisters around the world suffering in a famine, or suffering persecution as they are in the Sudan right now. We read about brothers and sisters being murdered for their faith as they are in Indonesia, or being imprisoned. And we feel ourselves wholly incapable of doing anything for them. So we pray.

One fundamental motive of prayer is to get from God what we can't produce. And that's okay. But there is another motive for prayer that Jesus talks about. The other motive is God your father wants to be with you. Have you ever considered that a reason to pray would be because God your father wants to spend time with you? Listen, our father in heaven doesn't need to be with us.

God has no needs. We don't fill a relational hole in God. I want to be real clear here. God is not lonely. God is not sitting by the phone praying and hoping we'll call because he feels incomplete without us. God doesn't need to be with us. He is complete in himself, a Trinitarian being of love and giving and receiving in himself.

But God your father wants to be with you. The Lord enjoys your company. In fact, the Lord is honored by your company. Does that blow your mind? It should! The same God that made the Milky Way and millions of other galaxies, the same God that created the oceans and Mt. Everest, and who rules over hurricanes, wants to spend time with you.

Look at Luke 15:1-2 with me.

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Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Eating with someone was considered a big deal when Jesus walked the earth. And it remains a big deal in the Middle East today. One famous scholar named Jeremais said, "Even in the East today eating with a man is an offer of peace, trust, brotherhood, and forgiveness; in short, sharing a table meant sharing life. Jesus' meal with tax collectors and sinners are an expression of his mission and message, 'God is including you in his family.'"

Now, the Pharisees refused to eat with tax collectors and sinners. In fact, the name Pharisee literally means "separated one." The Pharisees separated themselves not only from any contact with Gentiles, people outside of Judaism, but also from fellow Jews who were less devout than they were. Eating with a tax collector was considered defiling. The Pharisees had no interest in sharing life with a sinner.

Now, in the ancient Near East, generous people might feed a needy sinner. But even a generous person wouldn't eat with them. As I said, sharing a table with someone was an offer of peace, trust, brotherhood and forgiveness. To share food is to share life.

But Jesus may have gone way beyond simply sharing a meal with tax collectors and sinners. It says in verse 2,

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The Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

That word “welcomes” may suggest that Jesus was actually hosting a meal for sinners. If Jesus was the host of this meal, that would have been an even greater offense to the Pharisees than if he merely accepted an invitation to a tax collector’s house, or if he simply ate with a sinner.

There is a custom in the Middle East that goes back to antiquity in which a series of toasts are made when a person is invited over to dinner. First, the host stands up and compliments the guests. He lifts the glass of wine and he says that he and his household are honored by the presence of guests in his home. Then the guests toast the host and invoke God’s blessing on him.

Think about this. Can you imagine the Lord Jesus Christ lifting a wine glass and offering a toast on your behalf, declaring that he is honored by your presence? God your father wants to hang out with you. In fact, the Lord says that he is honored; he counts himself blessed to be with you. That’s what the Pharisees could not accept. That someone representing God would suggest that God would want to be associated with dirty, scummy, disobedient people like us. Not only does he want to be associated with dirty, scummy, disobedient people like us, but that he is actually honored by our presence.

Do you believe that? Does that stretch you? It should. It certainly stretched the Pharisees. And that’s why Jesus tells the story in response to the Pharisees attitude about the father, and about sinners. We read:

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verses 3-7: Then Jesus told them this parable: Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, “Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.” I tell you that in the same way there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

Why pray? Not only because God your father wants to spend time with you, but because the community of God’s people wants you to pray. Ken Bailey is a foremost authority on life in the Middle East. He wrote a wonderful book on the parables titled, “Poet and Peasant.” He said almost no one in Jesus’ day would have been wealthy enough to own a hundred sheep. The average family might own five, or at most ten animals. Typically, a village would hire several shepherds to watch the whole community’s sheep. So the loss of a sheep would not just be an individual shepherd’s loss. The loss of a sheep would be felt by the whole community. The community would say: It is our sheep that has wandered away and is far from home. That’s why the whole community rejoices when the sheep is found.

See, we tend to read the parables through the individualistic lenses of 21st century America. Our highly individualistic perspective is that every one of us is on our own. We each have to make our own way. We view Christianity essentially as "Me and Jesus in our own little private relationship." So someone wanders away from God. Someone who used to be with us has left church and is struggling to believe. They no longer pray. Or their prayers are filled with doubt. And we say: "Gee, that's too bad for them. I'm sorry to hear that they are making such bad decisions." At worst, we gossip about wandering sheep. "Did you hear what Joe is up to now? I kinda like Joe. It's too bad he's no longer around." "Christine was really sweet. We'll miss her. But we have our own life to live and our own individual success to celebrate."

Jesus told the story of the sheep who is far from the father's house. He was communicating to people that the loss of a sheep is our loss, not just their own loss. All of us are diminished when a person strays from the father's house. Our family has lost a family member. We don't get it. We don't get the huge biblical message spoken over and over again about community. That's why it is so difficult for people in the church to connect with each other in a small group. That's why we spend so much time pressing things like Newcomers' Class and New Communities. Because the New Testament communicates over and over again that we are members of each other; we are connected. The Christian life is not just me and Jesus. It is us together and Jesus.

We ought to ache over the straying of one of God's children. We ought to ache when someone walks away from the faith. It should break our heart when we hear that someone who was with us is having problems praying because they no longer really believe in the power of prayer.

And when one of us comes back, re-engages with the father, comes home we have to collectively rejoice because this is our family member. This is our brother, our sister, who has come back to the father's house. Why should you pray? Because the community of God's people wants you to pray.

Why should you pray? Because God your father enjoys bringing you all the way into his house. Look at verse 5 with me in your bibles.

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And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home.

I want you to underline this phrase in your Bible: He joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. A lot of times we think that the shepherd's joy is felt only in finding the lost sheep. But that's not what the text says. It says: When he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. The sheep may be miles from the shepherd's village. It has wandered into a distant country. The sheep may have a broken leg. It may be caught. It may be smelly.

You think: Well, God is certainly happy when someone who is not a follower of Christ repents and turns to Christ for the first time for salvation. We think God then moves on to someone else. I found you. I got you to cross the line. You prayed the prayer. Now, I'm going to move on to other people who have not yet prayed that prayer. God enjoys spending time with you. God wants the honor of your company. God wants to bring you all the way home from a far country.

We think: Well, God is happy that I've crossed the line. He probably gets pretty impatient, pretty weary with the whole restoration process. In my mind, I often imagine my father in heaven saying: Goodness, must it always be three steps forward and two steps backward with you? Must you always take so long in getting your act together? When are you finally going to get it and stop your nonsense? The joy of a father is felt not just in finding us, but in precisely in the process of restoring us. He joyfully puts the sheep on his shoulders, not grudgingly, not reluctantly, not impatiently, not angrily – but joyfully. He wants to bring us into his full purpose and plan for our lives. He wants to fully restore us. He wants to bring us all the way home into fellowship and friendship and intimacy with him.

The question, friend, is not how can you fix up your own life, how can you finally clean up your act. The question is will you let yourself be fixed up by God? Will you let God your father clean you up? Will you allow God your father to restore you? Prayer is allowing your father in heaven to make you whole. Prayer is allowing God your father to accomplish the purposes for which he created you and redeemed you. He doesn't just want to find you, locate you, and then move on. He wants to bring you home.

Few stories in the Bible describe better who we are, who God our father is, and what prayer is all about than the parable of the lost son. What I would like you to do is read this parable with me against the backdrop of Terry Waite and that word picture of prayer that we've been discussing. Prayer is coming home to God our father.

We read in Luke 15:11-12

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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.

Now, the son's request is not nearly as shocking to us as it would have been to those listening to Jesus. When the son asked for his inheritance now, it was the equivalent of saying to his father: "Father, I wish you were dead. I wish you would just go ahead and die so that I could get mine now." The son's request to an ancient listener would have been as obscene an insult to a father as anything that a son could say. "Just go ahead and die. I wish you were dead."

Even today, could you imagine someone saying this to a parent? “I wish you would die.” Imagine such a statement being made not to a child abuser, to a molester, but to a loving, providing, protecting and caring parent. Could you imagine saying: “I wish, mom or dad, that you would just go ahead and die so that I could get a portion of your estate already.” It is absolutely unthinkable. And we are a culture that does not reverence parents at all. Imagine saying something like that in a culture in which honor to parents is the most fundamental of all social laws. “I wish you were dead.”

Now could you imagine saying such a thing to God your father? “God, I wish you were dead. I wish you didn’t exist.” We would never be that blunt. We would smooth off the rough edges. We would say something like: “Father, I want you to theoretically exist. I want you to be there if and when I get into trouble, if I get cancer, if I hit a curve in life’s road that I can’t successfully steer through. If there is something that I can’t manage on my own, then I’d like you to be there as sort of a safety net. But right now, I’d like to be left alone for a while.” Have you ever said: “God, just leave me alone.”

To not pray is to treat God the father as if he were dead. “God, just leave me alone. I want to get through this day without you, without welcoming you, without connecting with you, without spending time with you. Lord, leave me alone. I just want the opportunity to enjoy some forbidden fruit for a while. I know there are some things that I’m doing that you don’t approve of. There is a relationship that you don’t like. There are some business activities, there’s this sexual thing, there’s this relationship that you want me to reconcile that I don’t want to.”

Are any of you in this place today where you’re saying at least in a major area of your life, if not your whole life: “Father leave me alone. Don’t remind me of your Word. Get out of my face. I want to do what I want to do without reference to you. I just want to explore my freedom for a while, freedom to discover who I am without the rules of my father’s house.”

Many of us just want to live life like 18-year olds who are out from under their parent’s rules for the first time. They are away at college. They are exploring their freedom. It is wonderful to be 18-years old and to call home once a week for a little more money. It is great when we can go home once a month and dump our laundry on mom and say: “Mom, I’ve got no clean clothes. Would you mind washing these three bags of laundry?”

Don’t many of us relate to God our father this way? Yeah, I shoot one up every once in a while, once a week: “Prosper me God. Bless my business. Help me out financially. Help me with this illness. When I run out of clean clothes, when my conscience is filthy and killing me, God would you mind cleaning me up? But otherwise, I want to live life by my own rules. God, my father, I wish you were dead.”

To not pray is to treat God as if he were dead. "Father, give me my inheritance. But I don't want to live in your house. I don't want friendship with you."

To not pray is also to waste and misuse the gifts God has given us.

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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.

When we wander from the father's house, we squander our gifts. To not pray is to use the gifts that God has given you without any reference to God the father's will, no reference to God the father's mind, to God the father's plan. Like the lost son, we always conveniently overlook the fact that all that we are and all that we have has been given to us by God the father.

The lost son uses his father's wealth. He wastes his father's gifts. But he never takes his father's desires into account. He never says: "Father, my shoes, my clothes, my food, my drink, my money, my house, even my body came from you. What do you want me to do with all that you've given me? What's your will? What's your heart concerning what I have? Father, you gave me so many good things. How would you have me employ those things?"

Perhaps the lost son begins to believe like a lot of us that he is a self-made man. "This money? Yeah, I've had a little bit of help from my father. But it was my skills that multiplied it. My dad is kind of a stuffed shirt, anyway. What's the point of having money, if you aren't going to enjoy life? If you can't have a little fun and indulge yourself every once in a while? My gifts? I'm the source of my gifts. I am the fountain from which I've been drinking." We are the lost sons and daughters of God, who regularly believe that there is no fountain higher than ourselves. We think we are like artesian wells, we bubble up our own supplies with which we replenish ourselves.

Friend, everything good in your life and in my life comes from God our father. But we regularly misuse the gifts God has given us. When we fail to pray, we use our gifts without reference to the father. For example, take the gift of reason. Go to any university, look at any company, hospital, or law firm and you will encounter brilliant people with great ability and know-how and capacity to weave together extraordinary arguments, people with great technical abilities. We will meet people all around us who never ever pause to say to God the father: "Father, I acknowledge you as the giver of my gift of reason." Go to almost any place where there are bright, capable people, and you will find the vast majority of folks never say: "Father, how would you have me use the know-how you've given me, the ability to think on my feet, my ability to articulate, to research, to analyze, to plan?"

There is a philosophy professor at Princeton University's Center for Human Values, who has been touted by The New Yorker Magazine as "the most influential living philosopher in the world today," and by Princeton University's president as "the most influential bioethicist alive today." The philosophy professor's name is Peter Singer. Listen to some of Professor Singer's statements. These are direct quotes from Professor Singer:

- *Newborn human babies have no sense of their own existence over time. So killing a newborn baby is never equivalent to killing a person. That is a being who can contemplate their own existence..*

Professor Singer does not believe a newborn baby is, according to his definition, a person.

- *It doesn't mean that it is not almost always a terrible thing to do, to kill a newborn, it is. But that is because infants are loved and cherished by their parents and to kill an infant is usually to do a great wrong to its parents.*

So the value of a life is only in whether someone else, who is a person, cherishes you. What if you aren't cherished? What if you are not wanted? There is nothing intrinsic about the sanctity of life.

- *Sometimes perhaps, because the baby has a serious disability parents think it better that their newborn infant should die. Many doctors will accept their wishes to the extent of not giving the baby life supporting treatment. My view is different than this. Only to the extent that a decision is taken by parents and doctors that it is better that a baby should die, I believe it should be possible to carry out that decision, not only by withholding or withdrawing life support, but also by taking active steps to end the baby's life swiftly and humanely.*

Professor Singer not only believes in the active euthanizing, the act of killing of a baby with a serious disability, but he also believes in the act of killing of elderly people with dementia, or people who have been injured in accidents. In such a case, he believes we should be guided by what they would have wanted since these people have no sense of the future.

Here is a brilliant man, with a great capacity to write and articulate his views, who has rejected God's view of the sanctity of life. A brilliant man who misuses and wastes his gifts because he never acknowledges God as the giver of his gifts. He uses his gifts in a distant country, away from his father's house, away from prayer to God the father.

Consider the misuse of artistic gifts in this country. What have we done with our capacity to create? Do we try to reflect our Creator's thoughts? Do we attempt to use our artistic gifts to attempt something of the Creator's mind? Something of

creation's beauty or mystery? Or the tragedy of the human condition? What do we spend our artistic gifts on?

How about Fear Factor? Listen to some of the segments from the fourth season of Fear Factor: Bug Body Bag, Fly Shake, Bug Windshield, Intestine Chew Milk and Chug, Save Your Partner in Tarantulas, Bobbing in Rats, Gross Dunk Tank, Sewer Transfer, Bury Spouse's Head in Worms, Save Your Twin Who is Covered By Bees; Eat Stink Bugs; Cow Eye Juice, Maggot Madness, Eat African Cave Dwelling Spiders.

I want to read to you something about Fly Shake. During his second visit to Fear Factor, Michael "Fudge" Thompson got more than a mouthful as he raced against the clock to chug down a shake made from live house flies and blended maggots.

Fear Factor: Describe the stunt to me.

Michael Thompson: Looking at the bowl with the maggots moving wasn't bothering me too bad, you know. The taste and the smell kind of got to me. But the fact that you got to spit in this container and then suck it out – that's what really got me gagging. And it was killing my stomach. The maggots were moving around and touching my tongue. So I just had to grab every upper body strength that I could muster up and try to choke it down. Man, it was terrible. It was the most horrific cuisine I ever tasted.

I'll stop. Do you think anybody associated with this show, anybody who conceives of the stunts, advertises on the show, participates on the show, or watches the show, says: "Father, what would you have me do with the artistic gifts that you've given me?"

We waste and misuse all of our gifts. Let me just refer to one final gift – the gift of making money. Those of you who are doing well financially, has it occurred to you that God has given you a gift to make money? So many wealthy people feel a degree of shame in the church, like there is something wrong with you because you have the ability to make a lot of money. But if you've been given the ability to make substantial sums of money, I'd like you to underline in your Bible Deuteronomy 8:17 and 18 because here is what it says:

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You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth.

God has given you a gift of being able to make money. Now, why did God give you this gift of being able to make large sums of money more than 99.9% of the people on the planet? To use it on yourself? To indulge yourself? To buy another thing for yourself, your family, or your house? To not tithe? To not say:

“God, you’ve given me this gift. Now what you would you, my Father, have me to do with it, is to waste and misuse your gift.” You need to go to the giver of your ability to produce wealth and say: “Father, what do you want me to do? I’ve been given a bonus. I’ve got stock options coming. I’ve got this inheritance. I’m making this sum of money. What do you want me to do?” To the untithing: “How can I give back to your kingdom?”

To not pray is to refuse to welcome God your father in your research, into your home, into your class, into the hospital where you work. To not pray is to refuse to welcome the Father’s thoughts about your art, your music, your studies. To not pray is to never surrender your money and your body, your relationships, and anything else God your father has given you back to God, to offer all that you are on the altar.

And to not pray is to lose everything including your Father’s loving voice. We read in Luke 15:13-16 these words:

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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.

The son loses everything. It says in verse 14 that he spent everything. It says in verse 14,

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After he spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need.

He, in particular, more than anyone else in the famine began to be in need. He began to be in need. Not just the other citizens, he began to be in need. In fact, he had to hire himself out to a citizen of that distant country to feed that citizen’s pigs. Many of you know that pigs are considered by Jews to be unclean animals. And so in effect, Jesus was telling his audience that this lost son, who was away from his father’s house, got to the place of ultimately having to renounce the religion he was born with. It would be as if one of your children renounced Christ. “Yes, I know Mom and Dad that you raised me in church. I’ve watched you pray my whole life. You even sent me to Christian school. But I renounce it all. I reject you, Mom and Dad, and the values you raised me with. I especially reject the God that you taught me to pray to.”

This lost son is free from his father’s rules. He doesn’t have to live under his father’s thumb. And in this place of freedom from God, he becomes a slave, a slave in a distant country, a slave to foreigner’s control, to the world’s control.

Friend, Bob Dylan said: "You gotta serve somebody. You either serve God the father, or you serve the devil. But you gotta serve somebody." You can be free from the father's control, but I'll bet you'll become an addict, a workaholic, sexual addict, an alcoholic; you're addicted to food or tobacco, or to another person.

You know when we leave the father's house, when we neglect prayer; we lose the father's voice. The voice that communicates to us that we are unconditionally loved. There is a marvelous treatment of the parable of the lost son. There is an extraordinary little book that I think we have in the bookstore. It is called *The Return of the Prodigal Son* by Henri Nouwen. I want to read to you from Nouwen's book about losing the father's voice. Nouwen says:

Leaving home is then much more than a historical event bound to time and place. It is the denial of the spiritual reality that I belong to God with every part of my being, that God holds me safe in his eternal embrace, that I am indeed carved in the palms of God's hands and hidden in his shadows. Leaving home is living as though I do not yet have a home and must look far and wide to find one.

Home is the center of my being where I can hear the voice that says: "You are my Beloved, on you my favor rests." I have heard that voice. It has spoken to me in the past and continues to speak to me now. It is the never-interrupted voice of love speaking from eternity and giving life and love wherever it is heard. When I hear that voice, I know that I am home with God and have nothing to fear. As the Beloved of my heavenly father, "I can walk in the valley of darkness: No evil would I fear." As the Beloved, I can cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out devils. Having "received without charge" I can "give without charge." As the Beloved, I can confront, console, admonish, and encourage without fear of rejection or need for affirmation. As the Beloved, I can suffer persecution without desire for revenge and receive praise without using it as proof of my goodness. As the Beloved, I can be tortured and killed without ever having to doubt that the love that is given to me is stronger than death. As the Beloved, I am free to live and give life, free also to die while giving life.

But when I leave my father's house I keep running about asking others: Do you love me? Do you really love me? When I leave my father's house I give all power to the voices of the world and put myself in bondage because the world is filled with ifs. The world says: "Yes, I love you, if you are good looking, intelligent, and wealthy. I love you if you have a good education, good job, and good connections. I love you if you produce much, sell much and buy much." There are endless "ifs" hidden in the world's love. These "ifs" enslave me, since it is impossible to respond adequately to all of them. The world's love is and always will be conditional. As long as I keep looking for my true self in the world of conditional love, away from my father's house, I will remain "hooked" to the world—trying, failing, and trying again. It is the world that fosters addictions because what it offers cannot satisfy the deepest craving of my heart.

Friend, to not pray is to not hear the father's voice affirming his unconditional love for you. To not pray is to not live from a center of home. To keep looking for affirmation and praise and reward and love never can be found away from God your father. Friends, are some of you continually looking to someone in this world – your dad, your mother, another guy, another woman, your spouse, your children, your boss – are you looking to someone in this world to meet your craving for unconditional love? It can never be found apart from God your father's house. You must pray so that you can hear the father's voice: You are my beloved. With you I am well pleased.

To pray is to come home – home from a distant country. Let's pray.

Coming Home to God Our Father

Rich Nathan

September 11-12, 2004

Prayer: Hungry for God Series

Luke 15:1-7; 11-24

I. Prayer Is Coming Home

II. Two Parables Of Coming Home

A. The Lost Sheep – Why We Pray

1. We Pray Because God Our Father Wants To Be With Us (Lk. 15:1,2)
2. We Pray Because The Community Of God's People Wants You To Come Home (Lk. 15:3-7)
3. We Pray Because God Our Father Enjoys Bringing You All The Way Home (Lk. 15:5, 6)

B. The Lost Son – Who We Are

1. To Not Pray Is To Treat God Our Father As If He Were Dead (Lk. 15:11, 12)
2. To Not Pray Is To Waste And Misuse The Gifts God Our Father Has Given (Lk. 15:13)
 - a. Reason
 - b. The Arts
 - c. The Ability To Produce Wealth (Dt. 8:17, 18)
3. To Not Pray Is To Lose Everything, Especially A Sense Of God Our Father's Unconditional Love (Lk. 15:13-16)