

**“He Ran to His Son”**  
*Prodigal God 2020, Pt. 4*

We are spending several weeks this summer taking an in-depth look at Jesus’ longest and most famous parable that has come to be called “The Parable of the Prodigal Son.” And I’ve been telling you that I don’t like that name and that one of these weeks I would tell you why and guess what...it won’t be this week. Maybe I’ll tell you next week...definitely next week...*maybe*. But today I *will* read you the story again – at least the first half - so if you have your Bibles and want to follow along, you can flip over to **Luke 15:11–24...**

*“Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them. 13 Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.*

*14 After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. 16 He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.*

*17 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! 18 I will set out and go back to my father and say to*

*him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.’*

*20 So he got up and went to his father. 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. 21 The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’*

*22 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. 23 Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. 24 For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.”*

Now, the one thing everybody knows about this parable – if they’ve ever heard of this parable – is it’s about forgiveness. We’re pulling a lot of great lessons out of this story – sonship, repentance, idolatry – things you may have never noticed in there before, but everybody knows this is about forgiveness. So I want us to see a few lessons about forgiveness here and then talk about what kind of community we would be if we really took this concept – admittedly *difficult* concept – and lived it out with one another. There are four points I want to pull out on forgiveness.

So let's jump into the first thing we learn about forgiveness in this parable – notice the father *runs* to his son, *pounces* on him – literally it says “fell on his neck and kissed him.” Now, if you're the father in this story and you're standing on your porch and you see your adult son who is basically...an *idiot*; you know, arrogant, irresponsible, selfish. He's already taken a third of your money away and squandered it and now you see him coming back and what are you going to assume? Are you going to say, “Oh, he must be repenting?” Of course not, the most logical thing to assume is that what? He's coming back to ask for more money.

And yet, the father, not knowing *anything* about the son's heart at all - it doesn't matter – the father *runs* from the porch, falls on his son and kisses him. The father does not make his son come to him and ask for forgiveness, he just gives it. **So that's the first point, forgiveness is assertive.** It's aggressive. He doesn't sit on the porch and say “Well, if he wants to come and grovel, then *maybe* I'll find it in my heart to forgive him.” Oh no, instead he goes after the son and without the condition of repentance, he forgives.

Now why is this so important? Jesus says in **Mark 11:25**, “*And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them...*” You see that? He doesn't say, “If you hold something against

someone and that person comes and asks forgiveness, then you can give them a chance.” No, no, it says if you are praying and you realize you're holding *anything* against *anyone*...forgive them – right there. And that's what this parable is illustrating.

But that's not how *we* work is it? We stand on our porches and we say, “Well, he started it – she started it – if they want to make it right then fine, I'll be happy to talk to them.” Jesus says, “No, you don't stand on your porch. You don't wait for *them* to do something. *You* forgive. *You* reconcile. *You* offer love. In **Matthew 18:15 (ESV)**, Jesus says, “*If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.*”

This is a constant principle. In **Matthew 5:23-24**, he says, “*Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something **against you**, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.*” Notice it says if someone “has something against you”, go and make it right. If *you* have something against someone else, go and make it right. Do you see it? It's always your move. You always have to go. It doesn't matter who started it. It doesn't matter who's to blame.

And I'll tell you this is the problem with the world. We stand on our porch instead of going and trying to reconcile and trying to get the relationship back and offering forgiveness. We stand on our porch and we say "They started it." Or "They're more to blame, I shouldn't have to be the one to go to them." But guess what, they're on *their* porch saying the same thing about you. They think you started it. That's the way our minds work – that's the way our hearts work. And the whole world is sinking into hell because everybody's sitting on their porch waiting for the other person to make the first move.

Jesus says, "My forgiveness, my love, is assertive and aggressive and it takes the initiative." That's number one. **Number two**, we learn from this parable that **forgiveness is sacrificial**. There's two ways in which the younger son has wronged the father; first, he wronged him financially. He took a third of the estate and instead of those resources being put to work to help the family, he squandered it in Vegas! It's all gone. He's permanently lowered the family's economic status.

But secondly he's also wronged the father by disgracing him. This was a shame and honor culture. We have difficulty understanding this because we live in such an individualistic society. About a decade ago, we visited Deanna's sister and family who were missionaries in the eastern European nation of Slovenia and I remember them telling us how shame based that culture is.

Our niece especially was telling us about the public shaming she witnessed in the schools. Every Friday the school children are called to the front of the room one by one to be publically chastised for that week's failures. "Johnny you were late on Tuesday and your math homework was awful and that sweater doesn't match those pants!" That's what they do. In a completely unrelated note, Slovenia also has the 7<sup>th</sup> highest suicide rate in the world. Shame based culture.

And in that ancient Mediterranean society, for the son to treat the father the way he did meant that the father had lost face. He lost reputation. He was no longer regarded as a person of great respect in the community. It was a tremendous blow. It was a terrible sin. He had robbed the father of social capital; robbed him of his status and his standing as well as having robbed him of his money. And that's why when the son comes back – if you read carefully – you'll see the son knows that the only way he can get back into relationship with the father is if he deals with this dual debt. That's the reason he says, "Make me like one of your hired men." We talked about this a couple of weeks ago. That means he wants to pay back the financial debt.

But then he also says “I’m not worthy to be called your son.” And that’s where he’s trying to repay the social debt; the emotional debt. He says “I’m not going to assume I have the right to call you ‘father’. I’m humiliating myself and groveling and defacing *myself* before you.” He’s trying to pay it back. He’s trying to make good on the debt – both of the debts. But the father *won’t* let him. And here we get into the essence of what forgiveness is.

But first, I have to give you a little side note; this is a parable, and a parable is a fictional story that Jesus, as a teacher, makes up to get across certain points. We have to be careful not to read it on just any level, but on the level that Jesus meant it. So for example, did Jesus design this parable to teach us about parenting? No. And therefore if you are the parent of an adult child who’s a destructive addict...no, this isn’t telling you what to do. No, you probably would not just hand over the checkbook and treat him quite this way. But that’s not what Jesus told this story for. Jesus is telling us how God’s forgiveness works and how our forgiveness ought to work towards people who have wronged us.

And here’s what we see; first of all the father *runs*. Now, all commentators agree that this was a demeaning thing for the father to do. In those days, the inferior would come to the superior. The superior

would remain stationary and the inferior would approach them – that’s the way it was done. *Instead*, the father runs to the son as if *he’s* the inferior and the son is the superior. But not only that, he doesn’t walk to the son, he *runs*. And to run meant that you had to lift up the edge of your robes and bear your legs. And that’s why adult males just didn’t do that. But this male does.

And what does it mean? He’s not letting his son grovel before him. He’s not doing anything that in that shame based culture would have gone towards making restitution for his - the father’s - damaged reputation. He doesn’t stand on his pride. So he refuses to let his son pay back the financial debt *or* the social debt. No hired man, not groveling, absolutely not. Instead, what does he say? Put a robe on him, bring him some shoes, put a ring on his finger.

And we said last week that was a signet ring – the ring by which the family made contracts – you didn’t sign your name, you used the family insignia. He’s giving him the family seal. This is all the father’s way of saying “I’m not going to let you pay me back. I’m not going to let you erase the debt. I’m going to *absorb* the debt. I’m going to *eat* it. I’m going to take it all on me.”

And this is the essence of what it means to forgive somebody. When someone wrongs you they've robbed you...always. Sometimes they literally robbed you of money, but usually they've robbed you of happiness or reputation or opportunity or something like that. Therefore they owe you. There's a debt; there's always a debt when someone wrongs you. And there's two things you can do with a debt; either you can make them pay you back, or you absorb it yourself. In other words, either they pay or you pay.

But that's not forgiveness. Forgiveness is absorbing the debt and therefore forgiveness is always a form of suffering. Forgiveness is absorbing pain instead of inflicting pain. And that's what this father did. You know how we can tell? Why is it, after all this little punk did, at the first sight of the son, his father *runs* to him and kisses and hugs him? Why?

I'll tell you why; if the father had been spending all those months, whenever he thought of his son, clobbering him in his heart, then when his son actually showed up he would have clobbered him. What was his father doing in his heart all those months? He was kissing him in his heart so when the son actually showed up he kissed him.

What does it mean to make the other person pay? It means you sit there and you clobber them in your heart. You think about all the things they've done – you replay the video in your head over and over – and then when you get the chance you slice up their reputation, or you avoid them or you're cold to them. But what is forgiveness? Forgiveness means you kiss them in your heart. You turn away from the anger. You pray for them. You ask...God...to...bless them. And when you have a chance to do them good you do good. And then if they ever do show up, you can kiss them instead of clobber them. The father paid the price – he absorbed the debt *in his heart* so that when the occasion arose, he was able to reconcile with his son. And that's what forgiveness is, it's sacrificial; it's absorbing the pain instead of inflicting it.

Now I know as a pastor – and therefore as a spiritual counselor, guide, whatever pastors are exactly – I know that what I just said to you; that the essence of relationships, the way to get free from your own past, the essence of forgiveness is absorbing rather than inflicting pain – I know that is a fairly dangerous thing to tell somebody. It's *not* an easy thing to do. It's not an easy thing to do spiritually and emotionally, unless you've got an internal power. What I'm telling you in other words, is not something that *you* can actually do – not in your flesh. And therefore we go to **point three**.

The forgiveness that is assertive and sacrificial – the forgiveness that heals relationships – has got to be a forgiveness that is **powered from inside**. When the father sees the son, we’re told something about his insides; what’s it say? (v.20) “*But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him;*”

If you were to study the gospels looking for the emotional expressions of Jesus, there is one Greek word used of Jesus’ emotions that is used more than all of the other’s put together. It’s “*splagchnizomai*” and it literally means a “churning in the bowels”. It’s a powerful metaphor to be “moved with compassion” – to be moved from the very depths of your being in love for someone. And that word is used *constantly* of Jesus Christ – read through and look for it, it’ll surprise you. “Moved with compassion.”

And this is the word used in this parable. Jesus intentionally uses this word that is really *his* signature word on this father. And you know why? He’s inviting us to see him in this father. So let’s do it. And here’s what we see when we do; the father did not stay on the porch, he ran to his son – and by baring his legs, he made himself incredibly vulnerable; socially - because he was losing his dignity - *and* emotionally – because he was risking further heartbreak.

Look, if someone has wronged you – which has happened to practically everyone in this room I would think – if someone you *really* love has rejected you, that hurts horribly and you never want to make yourself vulnerable again. You never want to open up and bare you soul to that person again unless you’re really, really sure that person has changed. But guess what, the father goes running to the son knowing that there’s a good chance he might get abused again. He might be wronged again.

But the Bible tells us something a bit more about Jesus. We’re told in **John 1:11** that “*He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.*” He came to the human race but humanity wronged him and abused him and yet, Paul tells us – we read this a couple of weeks ago – (**Romans 5:8**) “*But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*” Do you see?

Here’s a father who loses his dignity and makes himself vulnerable and absorbs the pain and the cost of reconciling with the son even though he knows there’s a risk he may be hurt again. But Jesus Christ didn’t just lose his dignity – he didn’t just bare his legs, he was stripped naked on the cross – he lost his glory. Jesus ran from heaven to earth, not knowing he might be rejected emotionally, but that he would be killed physically. He will be killed. Not just *maybe* he’ll be rejected, he *will* be rejected. And he still ran.

He didn't just throw his arms around us, he threw open his arms and was crucified. Talk about making yourself vulnerable. Why did he do it? Why did he do all of that for us? He was absorbing the debt. We sinned against God. God gave us our lives, God gave us the world and we've made a mess of it. We owe God *so* much; we've ruined a whole lot more than 1/3 of His estate. We *owe* Him. But what has God done? He doesn't stand on his porch and wait for us to get to heaven. He comes from heaven to earth and instead of inflicting pain He absorbs it. Instead of making us pay for our sins, on the cross He is paying for our sins.

See, when you look at the cross, you see God doing *cosmically* what you and I have to do anytime anybody wrongs us – absorbing the debt. But it's an infinite debt that He's absorbed. And He does it so that one day He can fall on our neck and kiss us. He's paying the price.

And someday, everybody, if you receive Christ as your savior, someday the Lord will *literally* throw His arms around you and will literally fall on your neck and kiss you. Mother Theresa said that when that happens, the first kiss from the lips of the Lord will make an entire life of suffering look like no more than one bad night in a bad motel.

Now, if you see He did that for you, that will give you what you need to do it for others. Why? It will move you from the depths of your being in love. And you'll need that compassion from within because there's two things you've got to do to be able to absorb the debts of someone who's wronged you – two things you have to do to forgive; you have to resist superiority and release from liability. What do I mean by that?

First of all, resist superiority; *all* grudges are to a great degree based on superiority. You can't stay mad at somebody unless you feel superior to them. You can't stay mad at them unless you feel like, "Well, I would never do that!" *If* you understand the gospel – if you understand that you were so lost that it took the death of the Lord of the universe to save you – if you *really* understand that in your heart of hearts, you can't look at *anybody* and say anything other than "I'm no better than you." See, if you stay angry at somebody but you say "I know I'm a sinner saved by grace" well back up a minute. You *don't* know you're a sinner saved by grace. You may say it in your head, but you don't believe it in your heart or you couldn't stay mad. You're no better.

And so the gospel gives you the power to resist the superiority, but then secondly it gives you the power to release the liability. What does that mean?

Basically, forgiveness means I no longer hold this person liable for their debt. If you find yourself thinking “this person owes me” so you ride them a little harder and you push them a little harder and you’re a little bit colder – well you’re holding them liable. You’re continuing to hold their debt against them. But forgiveness is you *cancel* that; you absorb the debt and release the liability.

How do you do that? Well, if you have a billion dollars in the bank, it’s not that hard to forgive a \$100 debt, is it? You can be pretty generous with the dinner check. But if you’ve got *nothing* in the bank, or worse still, you *owe* somebody \$1000, well, it’s a lot harder to forgive a \$100 debt right? And if you understand what you’ve got in Jesus Christ, you know that you are the world’s first trillionaire. What could that person have taken from you? Reputation? Do you know the honor of being a Christian?

Do you know what it’s like to have the King of the Universe crown you with His love and delight? What could that person have taken from you? Money? Happiness? Opportunity? Think of what you’ve got in Christ. To the degree that you understand what Jesus has given you, you’ll be able to release the one

who’s wronged you from the liability. And *that’s* the internal power that you need to forgive.

Now, one final point about forgiveness – we’ve said it is assertive and sacrificial and driven by an internal power – but there’s one more thing. **Point four: Forgiveness leads to resurrection.** We said last week that when the man said “My son was dead but he’s alive again” he didn’t mean he was *physically* dead and had been resurrected. What he meant was he had been dead to the *community*, dead to the family and the relationship - and now forgiveness has resurrected him.

Now, we’ve been asking this each week because we want to apply this – actually do it – so what would it look like, what kind of community would we be, if we really took seriously this gospel of forgiveness? Here’s what I would like you to consider; first of all, we’d be a community in which reconciliation and relationship repair happened all the time.

Out in the world, people will not admit their resentment – they just say “Oh, I don’t have a grudge, I just don’t want to have anything to do with that person.” “Of course I don’t hate them, silly, I just want to repeatedly stab them in the eye with a sharp stick.”



How do you know when you have a grudge against someone? Can I give you just one test? Remember what we said the father was doing in his heart towards the son – kissing not clobbering? If there's someone in your life who has hurt you or wronged you or kind of burned you – if you know that their failure would bring you some sort of satisfaction, if you know that their unhappiness would actually make you happy, you've got a grudge.

Christians first of all are people who know that they've got it. The mark of a Christian is not that you never blow it; it's that you own it when you do. We don't deny it first of all. And secondly, Christians, when they do have a grudge and they go to the person, they don't use the conversation to punish. They forgive *before* they go. Mark 11:25, if you know you've got something against somebody you *forgive* them.

See, if you've forgiven them in your heart – if you've used the power of the gospel to resist the superiority and release the liability – and *then* you go to confront them, why are you going now? You're not going to make them feel bad. You're not going to get something off your chest – you get something off your chest and put it on theirs and now who has the pain? You're back to inflicting not absorbing it.

See, what happens out in the world is; when somebody wrongs you, you just avoid them and you deny that you're mad unless it's gets so bad that you go to confront them in order to put them in their place and that just makes everything worse. But in the church, we must *never* let relationships cool off and go away – never! If you know your brother or sister has something against you or you have something against them, *go* to them – Matthew 5, Matthew 18, Mark 11. And you go gently. And you go *after* you have already forgiven – you're not looking to pick a fight.

And we should be a community where that is happening all the time. Because we are sinners and as such we rub each other the wrong way and you should *constantly* be having to go and reconcile with each other. And if not, you're kidding yourself about the fact that you *do* have resentment. So we ought to be a reconciling community first of all.

Secondly, we should be a community that **builds one another up**, not a resentful and belittling community. Here's another way you know if you are bitter against somebody; you caricature them in your mind. You turn them into a one dimensional cartoon figure. See, if somebody has lied to you and you're mad at them, then how do you think of them? They're a...liar. "He's a liar!"

But do *you* ever lie? Yes. So why do *you* lie? “Well, it’s complicated. There’s extenuating circumstances and I probably shouldn’t have but if you knew the pressure you’d cut me some slack.” See, in your mind, you lie but you’re still a three dimensional character. But that person’s flat – just a liar.

We live now in a country and in a society in which instead of trusting the power of truth to persuade people, we don’t look at people of different political parties, we don’t look at people of different religions, we don’t look at people of different persuasions, so much as people who are wrong, but they probably have a lot of good motives in their wrongness and there’s probably a lot of nuances to their worldview. No, they’re just stupid morons. They’re what’s wrong with the world. See, this is where we live, for a few months before or after any election, everyone on the other side is an idiot, a caricature, fools, liars. “Their goal is the destruction of liberty!”

Can I tell you, there’s not a single elected official in America whose goal is the destruction of liberty – they may achieve it through bad policy! – but nobody’s out to destroy America from within. Can we debate policies and ideas without resorting to name calling? I read someone on Twitter this week refer to members of one party as the “Dum-o-rats”.

Are we kindergartners? No, that’s not fair; kindergartners would get sent to the principal’s office for name calling.

That spirit can’t come into our church. Because it shows that you do not have the emotional humility that keeps you from superiority and the emotional wealth that makes it possible to be generous – to be gracious – to people who are saying things that you think are wrong. So first of all a reconciling community; secondly a community that builds up rather than belittles.

And lastly, we’ve got to be a community that lets people free from their past. When God saves you through Jesus Christ, the minute you believe in Christ, from that moment on, the determining factor in your life is not *your* past, it’s *his* past. It’s not what you have done; it’s what Christ has done. And you know what that means? It means that God has detached you from your terrible past. God’s not treating you according to your past; He’s treating you according to your great future in Christ. And no matter what people have done before they get here – no matter what people have done before they came to Christ – we do not rub their nose in it. We do not treat them differently.

I generally like to have the last word –ok, *always*. But I can't say it any better than this, so I'll leave you with the words of Lewis Smedes, a Christian philosopher who wrote a great book – several books actually - on forgiveness, he said this, “Towards the end of her book, *The Human Condition*, the Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt concludes that ‘there is only one thing that can release us from the grip of our history and that is forgiveness’. A hurting person needs more than anything else to be released from the painful past and that only happens if you forgive. Do you want to be stuck in your painful past? Do you want to be walloped again and again in the hurt?”

“Vengeance is having a videotape planted in your soul that cannot be turned off. It plays the painful scene over and over again inside your mind. It hooks you into its instant replays and each time it plays you feel the clap of pain again...Forgiveness turns off the videotape of pained memory. Forgiveness sets you free from your past. Forgiveness is the only way to stop the cycle of pain turning around in your memory. **Our only escape from history's cruel unfairness, our only passage to the future's creative possibilities, is the miracle of forgiveness.** And that comes through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and his gospel.” (*Forgiveness: The Power to Change the Past*)

Let's pray...