

THE FORGIVING FATHER
Luke 15:11-32
(outline by Joel Gregory)

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Everyone is not like the father of the parable of the runaway son. Some do not so quickly forgive those who desert them.

A man drove by and saw a late-model Mercedes sitting in a yard with a \$100 sign in the window. He stopped, thinking it must be a mistake, but went to the door to ask. A woman came to the door and confirmed that the sign was, indeed, correct – the Mercedes was on sale for \$100. As he whipped out his wallet and handed her \$100, the man asked, “Why are you selling it so cheap?” She replied, “My husband just ran away with his secretary, and he called and told me to sell his car and send him a check.” (*Preaching*, Vol. 3, No. 4)

Most of us, at some time in our Christian walk, have decided to leave home. We have decided to go away, to venture off from the Father and the family, from God and from the church.

This morning, as we look at the parable of the runaway son, we, if we are honest, will probably discover that we can identify with this story.

I. We leave home when we think that life is getting away from the Father.

Verses 11-13a

The essence of life for us, like the runaway son, suddenly becomes immediacy of fulfillment. I want it all NOW. The young man, about 17 years old, demanded his share of the family estate. This demand left no room for resources for his father in the future. He wanted it all for himself now. He wanted to get away from his father, from his family. He knew a better way. He wanted to get as far away from the father’s watchful eye as he could possibly get. To leave the father is to deny that he knows best.

Some of you here today are not close to the Father, as close to the family as you once were. You thought you knew a better way. You did not want to be present with God the Father, around God’s family, the church, any longer.

If there is a word picture in these early verses, it is found in the words of verse 13, “far country.” Being far away from the Father, being away from His supervision – because we know a better way, a faster, fuller life. Sometimes we forget that it is only because He wants the best for us that He restricts us.

II. We then hit the reality of life away from the Father.

Verses 13b-16

Life away from the Father begins with a frenzy of vitality. Everything looks good. What freedom! No watchful eye of the father or his children to hinder us from total freedom.

The runaway son, at first, had a fabulous time spending all of his inheritance. He made many new friends with his fast money. But he quickly found that all of his money was gone, and a famine came over the land at just that time. Funny, just the time that all of his money was gone, his friends seemed to disappear.

He was hungry. He took the most humble of all possible jobs for a Jewish boy – that of feeding pigs, an animal declared unclean. As he was feeding the swine, he was prepared to eat their pods, their food. The boy who wanted independence found himself dependent on a Gentile swine farmer. Funny, he had left the care of a loving father for the pig farm.

His life was empty away from the father. Every time we get away from the Father, we find ourselves empty and unfilled. We find ourselves in a famine.

III. We start back home when we remember that the Father is good.

Verses 17-24

Clem the cat came home after eight years of being who knows where. A homeowner in Bancroft, Wisconsin, said he heard a cat meowing on the front porch. When he opened the door, a big, long-haired, gray male cat walked in, checked things out, began purring, and then jumped up on his favorite chair. Family members couldn't believe their eyes. But when they compared the cat to pictures taken eight years earlier, they could only conclude that Clem the cat had come home.

What remarkable homing instincts God has given to some animals!

Ever heard of a “homing pigeon” – birds selectively bred for their ability to find their way home over extremely long distances? Scientists believe that homing pigeons have both compass and map mechanisms that help them navigate home. The compass mechanism helps them fly in the right direction, while the map mechanism allows them to compute from where they are to where they want to be – home. Take a homing pigeon even 1,000 miles away and he will find his way home.

Some of you have been away from the Father, away from His family, for a long time. Oh, you have stopped by from time to time, just to see what is going on, but you've not really been here, been close to God with your whole self.

Some of you here feel empty. You identify with the runaway son because you yourself have been running from God, from your Father. You're a homing pigeon longing for home.

Our Lord begins where we would never begin, at the point of human destitution. The greatest blessing a man ever gets from God is the realization that if he is going to enter into His Kingdom, it must be through the door of destitution. Naturally, we do not want to begin there. That is why the appeal of Jesus is of no use until we come face to face with realities. Then the only One worth listening to is the Lord. (Oswald Chambers, "He Shall Glorify Me." Quoted in *Christianity Today*, Vol. 31, No. 8)

Some here today are at the point of destitution. But the runaway son remembered that the father is good.

When one has never known God's love, he or she can come under great conviction and sorrow about not having an relationship with God.

But stronger still is the hurt and pain that you and I, children of God, feel when we have run away – because we know that God is good. We know what it feels like to bask in His love, to have a close relationship to Him, and we'll feel the void hurting in our heart when that relationship is broken.

Robert Robinson had been saved out of a tempestuous life of sin through George Whitfield's ministry in England. Shortly after that, at the age of twenty-three, Robinson wrote the hymn, "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing."

**Come, Thou Fount of ev'ry blessing,
Tune my heart to sing Thy grace;
Streams of mercy, never ceasing,
Call for songs of loudest praise.**

Sadly, Robinson wandered far from those streams and, like the Prodigal Son, journeyed into the distant country of carnality. Until one day – he was traveling by stagecoach and sitting beside a young woman engrossed in her book. She ran across a verse she thought was beautiful and asked him what he thought of it.

**Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love.**

Bursting into tears, Robinson said, "Madam, I am the poor, unhappy man who wrote that hymn many years ago, and I would give a thousand worlds to enjoy the feelings I had then." (Kenneth W. Osbeck, *Hymn Stories*, p. 52)

The runaway son remembers, "It is well, even for the slaves at my father's house. Perhaps my father will accept me back as a slave" (vs. 17-19).

It is scary to go home when you have been disobedient to a parent.

Sometimes we need to learn to adapt to situations, like the teenage boy who came in about two hours after his curfew. As he got home, he killed the car lights, cut the ignition, took his shoes off, and did everything possible to slip in quietly. It was 2 a.m., and as he walked down the hall a light came on and his mother called out, “John, what time is it?” “It’s midnight, momma,” he replied. But just at that moment the cuckoo clock let out two cuckoos. So John stood there and cuckooed ten more times! (*Preaching*, Vol. 1, No. 4)

But we need not be afraid of coming home to the Heavenly Father.

The father saw him, while he was still on the horizon. “Yes, could it be? It is my son.” And he ran to embrace his boy.

The father spanned the distance to receive his son.

Look at verses 21-24. The son is aware his father owed him nothing. He was coming back as a slave, but he was received into son-ship.

Gore Vidal’s book, *Lincoln*, tells about the day the president’s counselors came to discuss the time after the war, which was drawing to a close. They wanted to punish the South as a vanquished enemy. When asked how he planned to deal with the South, Lincoln said, “I will treat them as if they never left.” God’s grace is that way. It treats us as if we had never sinned. (*Preaching*, Vol. 2, No. 5)

Some of you here today need, as well, to discover the insanity of life away from the Father. We, too, need to “come to our senses.” The boy had been telling himself “This is living,” while, all the time, he was dying.

You, too, need to come home to the Father and His family.

We start home when we deliberately move from lethargy and despair. He decides, “I will set out....” The emphasis is on the immediacy, “I will go at once.” Life away from the Father turns us into semi-paralyzed sleepwalkers. We should act at once or we will never act at all. There is a moment to stand, or never stand at all.

We start home when we make no claim except the Father’s grace. Without excuse or extenuation, he acknowledged it all. He gives up every claim of his own against the father or life itself. He simply wants to get back to the father’s house, even as the lowest laborer. Anything would be an improvement. We do not come back to the Father by making claims against Him or explaining away our own insanity. We simply arise and cry out, “Make me....” (v. 19). The rest is up to His grace.

Stanley Jones writes about a crucial moment in his life when he found himself on his way to what could have been a spiritual disaster.

“For months after my conversion, I was running under cloudless skies. And then, suddenly, I tripped, almost fell, pulled back this side of the sin, but was shaken and humiliated that I could come that close to sin. I thought I was emancipated and found I wasn’t. I went to the church meeting – I’m grateful that I didn’t stay away – went, but my music had gone. I had hung my harp on a weeping willow tree. As the others spoke of their joys and victories of the week, I sat there with the tears rolling down my cheeks. I was heartbroken. After the others had spoken, John Zink, the class leader, said, “Now, Stanley, tell us what is the matter.” I told them I couldn’t, but would they please pray for me. Like one man, they fell to their knees, and they lifted me back to the bosom of God by faith and love. When we got up from our knees, I was reconciled to my heavenly Father, to the group, and to myself. I was reconciled. The universe opened its arms and took me in again. The estrangement was gone. I took my harp from the willow tree and began to sing again – the Song of Moses and the Lamb, especially the Lamb. The cross was my refuge and my release.

“That was a very crucial moment in my Song of Ascents, the moment when I lost my music. My destiny was in the hands of that group. I was a very bruised reed; suppose they had broken me? I was a smoldering wick; suppose they had snuffed me out? Just a criticism, “I told you so. Too good to be true. He was riding for a fall.” But they never uttered a criticism or even thought of one, as far as I could see. The reaction was nothing but redemptive love. That group became redemptive. I saw and experienced the power of redemptive love incarnate in a group.”

Grant Barnes tells the story of a young lady –Sally – who was in one of his counseling groups.

“Sally was one girl who would never really open up. She just glanced at the floor. She had been found nearly starving in her apartment. She had totally withdrawn from work and friends into a deep depression.

The hospital staff had nursed her back to health. She looked healthy. In fact, if you were to see her in the shopping mall or at church, you would guess she was just another young professional single woman.

Then one day, another young woman mentioned her harsh father. Sally spoke her first words in the group, “At least your father knew you were alive.” Trying not to appear too anxious, I led her into further conversation before the group.

She told us, “When I was a little girl, I loved the long summer afternoons. There would be no school, and my friends and I would play outside late into the evening. As the sun went down, and the fire flies would come out, one by one, my friends’ mothers and fathers would come out onto the front porch of their houses and call out to their children. “Mary, time to come in.” “Steven, time to come in to supper.” “Randy, dinner time.” But no one ever called me inside.

““Sometimes I would wait until it was very late and very dark, hoping that my folks would come out to call me in. They never did. Sometimes it would be so cold and dark that I would

be afraid to stay outside, but I would force myself to stay just a few minutes longer. Eventually, though, I'd give up and go in.

“Once I dreamed that I was outside with all my friends and I heard my daddy call my name. I remember waking up and being so sad that it was just a dream.” (*Illustration Digest*, July 1996)

Our heavenly Father is not like Sally's daddy. The story of the Bible is the story of the Prodigal Son, of the forgiving father. God has a long invitation for us to come home to Him. He knows where you are this morning, whether you are close to Him or a far way off. He calls you by name. “Come home today.” God has not forgotten where you are. He has not forgotten your name.

In Isaiah 42:6 and 45:4, he says, “I have called you by name...I have called you in righteousness, I will hold your hand, and I will keep you....”

He softly calls you today...come home...come home.