

God of Mercy & Wonder

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Would you go to Luke 15 this morning? Luke 15. As I was preparing Ephesians, I stumbled upon the old familiar parable of the prodigal son and it just kind of apprehended my heart and I thought, "I want to preach this before I'm gone for a month or so and leave you with these thoughts." Luke 15, beginning in verse 11. Our Lord is speaking and he says,

11 And He said, "A man had two sons. 12 The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' So he divided his wealth between them. 13 And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. 14 Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished. 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. 16 And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him. 17 But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! 18 I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men."' 20 So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. 21 And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; 23 and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' And they began to celebrate."

This old familiar Bible story speaks to us of our great God of mercy and wonder, but let me say to you this morning it's not enough to have experienced the mercy of God but you need to also wonder over it, marvel over it, and even more, worship God for it.

I've entitled this "God of Mercy & Wonder." You say, "Well, it's the parable of the prodigal son." That's not a bad title, it's certainly not a wrong title but that's not the emphasis. The emphasis is not on the boy who rebelled. As a matter of fact, the boy in this parable represents all of mankind. All have rebelled. There is nothing unique about that. All rebel against God. What's unique is the marvelous inestimable wonder and glory of the mercy of the father who represents our God.

Let me talk for a moment about mercy. You see, mercy is God withholding the wrath and retribution which he has full authority to extend. It's God withholding the wrath and the retribution which he has full authority to extend. Be mindful this morning that showing mercy is not a strain for God. It's a strain for us sometimes and when it's a strain for you to be forgiving, when it is a strain for you to show mercy, that needs to remind you that you're not God. Showing mercy is not difficult for him and that's a marvelous thought because he's the Triune holy God. The offensiveness that sin has to him is beyond our comprehension. It's showing mercy to sinners. It's not a strain for him. It's not difficult for him. For him to show mercy, abundant, passionate, all-encompassing mercy to undeserving sinners is as natural to God as breathing is to his creatures. Mercy flows out of God's unquestionable righteousness and out of his invincible might. Furthermore, God's mercy is an eternal part of his very holy nature. As he extends mercy, he does so with deep joy and with deep happiness, actually a joy and a happiness that exceeds all others. God's happy about being merciful. I love that mental picture.

Mercy is inseparable from all of God's other attributes or characteristics. Mercy is in full harmony with all of God's attributes. For example, he has the attributes of love. He has a heart of love. His love has been fixed on his children from eternity past and this great unbreakable love is unwavering in its faithfulness and it is unlimited in its capacity, and this great love for his children includes his mercy. They dwell together.

Think about the attribute of his sovereignty. Mercy is extended only upon the orders of his sovereign choice. Mercy is extended according to his sovereign purposes. That is, he extends mercy to whom he desires and when he desires. When Moses pled with God about God's favor and God revealing the fact that he was with them, God said to Moses in Exodus 33:19, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion." In other words, "It's up to me."

What about God's attribute of joy? His love toward us comes to us accompanied with great joy and with great happiness. He loves loving us. Did you hear that? He doesn't just hold his nose and say, "Do you have any idea how wretched you are before me? Have you any comprehension of how vile and undesirable you are to my holiness?" No, he doesn't do that. He has the capacity to show mercy and he loves loving us. He loves showing mercy to us. You say, "Boy, I couldn't do that." No, and I couldn't either but you're not God. Aren't you glad God is God and he's not like us?

Justice is another attribute of God and Calvary is the monument of mercy. There on Calvary as Jesus died, he fully served and satisfied the holy justice of God. By sending

his Son to Calvary to take our place in judgment and dying for us, the just demands against us are fully completely rectified. Our God is a God of mercy and wonder.

Well, let's outline it. It's a familiar story but let's bask in the glory of it again. I've not put the outline on the screen because I didn't want you to take time to write, I want you to contemplate. I want you to meditate. I want you to wonder and I want you to worship.

I. The rebel's run. Again, this represents all mankind. The younger son, the parable tells us, said, "Dad, give me my part of the inheritance. I want my part." He said, "Okay, I'll divide it up. You and your brother, I divide the inheritance between you." And then immediately he goes away, running away from his father's house. Not just geographically the father's house, from his father's values, from his father's morals, from his father's God.

He's a rebel on the run. You've heard the phrase a rebel without a cause, that's a lie. Every rebel has a cause and every rebel has the same cause, it's self-idolatry and self-worship. That's the new theme of the great United States of America. We've convinced the people in America today there is no God, there is no one to answer to, there is no one to live unto, there is no one to honor with your life other than your own self and selfish lust and that's why we have the perversion and immorality and godlessness we are seeing in our culture. But all men in some capacity are runners from God. The Bible says in verses 11 and 12 he's got his heart and mind focused on his dad's money. Like all rebels, it usually begins with the love of money. 1 Timothy 6:19 reminds us the love of money leads to sorrow, how we as sinners and rebels against God can look God's word straight in the eye and we mock it and we call ourselves wise as we do what we want to do with the things God has given us instead of what he would have us to do.

Verse 13 says this young man rebels, takes the money and goes to a distant country far away from his father's house. How many of you sitting under my voice this morning have traveled from the Father's house? This morning you're in a distant country? You can grow up in church, sit on the pew every week, go to vacation Bible school, attend all the activities of the church but still have a heart that is far from the Father's house. You're a rebel, a rebel running from God and your Creator. The Bible says in Isaiah 53:6 that all of us are like this. Isaiah 53:6, the prophet said, "All of us like sheep have gone astray, Each of us has turned to his own way; But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all To fall on Him."

Verse 13 tells us that this boy runs to this distant country away from his father's house, his father's God, his father's values. He squandered his estate. He just scattered it out and how we today squander the gifts of God and we squander God's glory, spending our lives for what we think is right, what we think is best, what serves our lust and our appetite and saying, "God, what would you have me do first?" And the irony of it all when we think we're finding pleasure, we're actually robbing ourselves of the higher pleasures God has for us.

He's squandering away the gifts of his father and all men go their own way and don't worship and honor God first. You see, we were made for God's glory. We were made to

take the gifts he gives us, the gift of life, the gift of intellect, the gift of whatever wealth we have and all of our talents, we were made to use them that we would reflect who he is and bring him glory but as the Scripture says, "All have fallen short of the glory of God." We've all failed to be a good clear reflector of the great holy truth of God from our lives out to others because we are rebels on the run. We've squandered what he has given us. God's purpose for us is really the only one that matters. Our eyes, our ears, our tongues, our wealth, they all should be for his glory and we are to love God with all of our hearts, but we take all of the capacities and all the gifts he has given us and we run to our own pursuits. Oh, we may give God a little token religion, a little token religious ritual or observance. God will pop in most Sundays and give you a little token but that doesn't matter, your heart is still far from the Father's house. We fall short. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Like this young man, we are a rebel on the run squandering the gifts God has given us.

II. The rebel's ruin. The rebel's ruin. The Bible tells us here that he turned from his father's house, he goes away. Verse 14 says he spent everything. He just wasted it all. He's now impoverished. He went to this far city, he lived it up for a while, maybe months, maybe a few years, I do not know, and then all of a sudden he has wasted it all and it's all gone. You see, the city of sin calls and allures with its bright lights, its enticing music, its sensual pleasures, its raucous laughter but soon the lights go out and there's darkness. Soon the music stops and there is silence. Soon the sensual pleasures end and now there's pain. The laughter stops and there's mourning. You see, sin pays in counterfeit money. Make sin something you fight against, not something you coddle and treasure. It's a lie. It's counterfeit. Sin's joys are hollow joys. They don't last.

When God's law tells you don't do something, he's saying don't hurt yourself. When God's law says do something, he's saying help yourself. All of mankind originally is like the foolish man who handles a rattlesnake and when the rattlesnake bites him and the burn and the searing and the poison goes into his veins and he knows it's serious, instead of throwing the snake down, he caresses it more closely and looks to it for his salvation. That's what we do. That's how blinded we are. That's how corrupt we are. That's how deficient we are in character and in wisdom, that when we go to the world and it bites like an adder we reach for the world and say, "Now help us," instead of looking to the God of all help. We are blind fools. Our lust for this world and for sin strikes us and then we reach back to the same vile world for healing, never realizing that we are spiraling further and further down.

The Bible says in verse 15 he indentures himself to a man in the land. Instead of looking for the real hope, he just looks for someone else in this distant country and he finds himself enslaved to a man in order to just have enough to survive. In verse 15, this Jewish boy is now slopping the hogs. That's his job, feeding the pigs. Now to understand the impact of that, you've got to understand how ancient orthodox Jews viewed hogs. There was nothing that made you more vile and unclean, nothing that was avoided more than pigs and now he's living with the pigs.

Hungry. The Bible said he gladly, he'd eat the husks. It's a locust bean that they would feed and it didn't even have the nutrient in it. It's just the husk. He was so hungry he said, "I'll gladly eat the husks that the hogs have to eat." Oh, sin pays in counterfeit money. The old evangelists used to say sin will take you further than you want to go, sin will keep you longer than you want to stay, and sin will cost you more than you want to pay. That's what he's finding out.

The Bible says that he's sitting there with these pigs wanting to eat the husks the hogs are eating, and there he finds himself looking for hope by further involving himself in the distant country. Deeper and deeper and deeper he goes. You see, do you understand something? Sin makes you stupid. You run with sinners, you keep committing the sins you're committing and you'll start thinking things you never thought you would think. You'll start saying things you never thought you would say. You'll start running with people you never thought you'd run with because sin makes you stupid. You'll start defending things you never thought you'd defend.

That's where he is, becoming bound to a man in a distant land and hanging out in a hog pen and eating their husks just to survive because verse 16 tells us that no one was giving him anything. Oh, he had a lot of friends when the money was there. He had a lot of friends when he could buy a round of drinks. The girls really liked him because he had the fanciest chariot at the bar. But now he has nothing and nobody is a friend anymore. He attached himself to this world, he joined up with this world and he attached himself to that which would could give him no help.

The rebel's ruin. That represents all of mankind. That represents you and that represents me. The rebel's ruin. Listen to me: there has never been a man that walked the face of the earth who gave himself to the world that ended well. It hasn't happened. Not one. It always leads to ruin. Always leads to ruin. Oh, praise God. III. The rebel's return. There is a returning there. It starts with a turning in his heart, first of all.

Look at verse 17 in your text, "But when he came to his senses." Literally it means he came to himself. I guess he's gotten down to nothing and all he's got left is the shirt on his back and the last thing he came to was himself. He's got nowhere else to think. He came to his senses. I believe this speaks to an awakening in his heart, an awakening in his mind. He's beginning to see the forest for the trees. "I once was lost, but now I'm found. I was blind but now I see."

He begins to see the truth. This is the start of repentance in his heart. You do understand that you don't just repent, when you're saved, you become a repentor. He's starting the repentance. He's learning what the world is and that it's against his father, it's against God, and he's learning to see this is no longer what I want to be about. I want to turn and find my hope somewhere else. It's the beginning of repentance.

He says in verse 17, "In my father's house, even the hired men, the hired servants have enough bread." I think the key here is now he's thinking about the father's house. That

represents God. In other words, he's saying, "I know the answer is not where I know the answer is not in me, the answer is not in this distant country. The answer is my father."

The Bible speaks in verse 17 of how this hunger got him there. You see, hunger can be a good thing. The Bible said a man's hunger drives him on to work. Old Dr. Vance Havner preaching this text back in the 1950s used to say if we had the welfare programs in the prodigal son's day that we have today, somebody would have given this boy a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and a glass of milk and he would never have gone home. Now don't misunderstand me, there is a good use for welfare programs, there is a good use for helping those who literally can't help themselves, but sometimes we support those that God is trying to cure. He's hungry and it caused him to say, "The answer is not here. The answer is back at the father's house."

So now we see repentance come to full bloom in verse 18, "I will get up. I will turn to what I'm looking to. I will turn to what I used to see for my pleasure and my purpose in life. I'm going to get up from that, turn," verse 18, "and go to my father and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight.'" So we see new affections in the heart. "My affections are turning from the world and my lust and my pleasures and I'm turning back to my father's house. My heart is turning there." He's repenting of all that sin. He's beginning to love all that's really good and he has just an overall humility.

Last, IV. The father's mercy. Oh, what a father he has. Oh, what a father. The father's mercy. This unconditional forgiveness and acceptance of this father, his father's mercy is an active mercy. It's full of affection and love. You see, this is a picture of how God views those who believe in his Son Jesus Christ, those who say, "I see me and I'm the problem. I see the world and it's more the problem. I've got to look beyond that to Christ and believe on him because the rest of it's counterfeit. It leads to ruin and dishonor of the God who made me." Have we squandered God's glory? Of course we have. Do we deserve the eternal lash of divine judgment? Yes, we do, but he chooses to have mercy on us if we trust in his Son. He chooses to have mercy if we'll trust in his Son.

Let me give you three quick subpoints here about the father's mercy. First of all, notice the demonstration of mercy. Look at verse 20. The boy, the Bible says, "he got up and came to his father's house, but while he was still a long way off, his father saw him." His father would be working out in the front pastures and he would look way down the road, "I wonder if my boy is coming home today?" His father would be over here caring for the oxen or whatever but that he would look way down the road. His father was looking for him and longing for him far before he turned to look toward the father's house. That's the eyes of mercy. Do you understand, child of God, that a sovereign God cast his eyes of mercy looking and longing for you before the foundation of the world? That's the eyes of mercy. The eyes of mercy. While you squandered, while you sinned, while you didn't care, while you gave him no gratitude, no thought, no obedience, no yieldedness, loved yourself, loved the world, loved your lust, his eye of mercy was piercing in your direction, longing and looking. That's the picture we get here. The text makes us see that. He's getting up and coming to his father's house but while he's still a long way off, his father saw him. That's the eyes of mercy.

Then the Bible says in verse 20, "and he felt compassion for him," and that's the heart of mercy, "and he ran to him," that's the feet of mercy, "and he embraced him," that's the arms of mercy. Are you in the distant country squandering what your Creator God has given you, living life your way for yourself and for this world? I'm going to tell you here is what God is saying to you: arms of mercy. Arms of mercy waiting to wrap you up, show you compassion and care and security for the rest of time and for all eternity.

The eyes of mercy, the heart of mercy, the feet of mercy, the arms of mercy, and then the lips of mercy. The Bible says when he came up to his father's house, his father ran down to him and he hugged him and he kissed him. What a beautiful picture. Kissed him. You see, God here pictured in this father, this father weeping, this father clinging, this father probably uncontrollable in his emotion, this father kissing this boy's cheek. Sinner, listen to me, God doesn't just tolerate you, he doesn't just forgive you, he doesn't just let you return, he deeply loves you though you have done nothing to merit it, nothing to earn it, and nothing to deserve it. Oh, what a God he is. So this is the demonstration of mercy.

Subpoint 2: gifts of mercy. Gifts of mercy. Immediately, immediately in verse 22, "But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet.'" So immediately the father covers him. What a picture of what God does for us in Jesus Christ. The Bible says when we believe on Jesus Christ, we are covered, we are clothed in his righteousness. He brings out the best for him. That's what God does for us. He doesn't just say, "Well, you take a corner place here now. You've been in rebellion a long time. I want to test you for a while." No, God brings us in and gives us the best robe, a robe of royalty. We are joint heirs with Jesus Christ. A robe of acceptance and love. An inheritance and belonging. Oh, what a picture this is of our God.

The Bible says in verse 23, the father says, "and bring the fattened calf and kill it, let's eat and let's celebrate." He didn't just feed him, he feasted him. "We're going to bring the calf we put up and been fattening out for the big celebration. Well, today is the big celebration." The Bible speaks of the marriage supper of the Lamb. Do you know what the marriage supper of the Lamb is? That's it right there. God says, "I've got all my children home. You don't deserve it but I've got all of you home and we're going to have a great big feast celebration." What a picture of Christ this is. As Jesus said figuratively, "This blood you drink, you're drinking my blood. Drink my blood. Eat my flesh. Drink my blood." In other words, "I am the feast." God didn't just give us anything, he gives us the best. Christ is the best. The best of the best of the best is Jesus Christ.

Third subpoint, not only the demonstration of mercy and the gifts of mercy but God's joy in extending mercy. Don't miss this. He says, "We're going to have this big celebration," verse 24, "for this son of mine was dead and has come to life," what a picture of the new birth, "he was lost and has been found." And they began to celebrate." They began. Now the father's joy is spreading to all. This is the joy of mercy and the father's joy spreads to everyone here. Luke 15:10, Jesus says, "I tell you, there is joy," listen, "in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." I believe this means that God's joy

infects the angelic host with joy. I think that's why when Jesus was born as the angels appeared to those shepherds, they started saying, "Glory to God in the highest!" Man, this is exciting. This is joyous what God is doing. It's a wonderful thing. Hebrews 1:9, speaking of Jesus, "You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness above your companions."

Church, I charge you this morning when you think of God, think of God that's exceedingly happy. God is full of great joy. He is a happy God. God is the happiest being in the universe. No one is happier than he is. He's exceedingly happy. He's intentionally happy. He's immeasurably happy. Do you know one of the reasons why God is happy? God's happy about being God. God's the only being in the universe that can look in the mirror and say, "Wow! That's perfect." Because he's God, he can't be anything but perfect and he's happy about it, but in this context, God has great happiness over the perfect redemption of his children. Did you hear that? God is tickled to death that when he sent his Son to redeem his children, that Jesus got every one of them. Jesus said, "Of all that the Father gives me, I lose not one." And God is just exceedingly happy about the perfect plan of redemption and the perfect way it was planned. He's exceedingly happy about the perfect way it was carried out by his Son Jesus Christ. He's exceedingly happy about the perfect way it is being applied to the lives of men and women and boys and girls right now in the church age, and he's exceedingly happy about how it is going to culminate in a perfected glorified bride when we all get to heaven.

The happiness of God over what he has done for us in mercy. God's happy about you being saved so why don't you get happy about being saved? What a wonder. What a marvel. What a mercy. What a mercy. What a mercy.