

The title of this morning's sermon is, *"The Prodigal Son's Father."*

On Sunday mornings we're working our way through Luke's gospel verse by verse and we find ourselves in the middle of the parable of the prodigal son. But for Scripture reading open to Acts 17. Please stand with me for the reading of God's Word. We will start at **verse 16...**

Acts 17:16 Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. 17 So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. 18 Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, "What does this babbler wish to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities"—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.

You may be seated. Let's pray.

During one of our recent family Bible studies we talked about wisdom being compared with treasure in Scripture:

- **Proverbs 2:4 Seek [wisdom] like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures.**
- **Proverbs 3:15 [Wisdom] is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her.**

I asked my children why wisdom would be compared with treasure, such as gold and silver, and they came up with the correct two answers:

1. First, wisdom is valuable like gold and silver
2. Second, wisdom must be diligently sought, like gold and silver

The more sermons I prepare, the more convinced I become that there are real treasures available if we will dig into God's Word and search for them.

One of the treasures I discovered recently is associated with the background of Jesus preaching the parable of the prodigal son.

You can read this parable on its own and be greatly blessed by it, but if you dig deeper and understand WHY Jesus preached this parable, there is even more blessing.

When Jesus preached this parable He shattered some of the most common misconceptions about God the Father in His day. You could almost think of this parable as a strongly apologetic passage defending a right view of God the Father.

We have already seen two misconceptions dismantled, and this morning we will see a third. Let me briefly remind you of the two previous misconceptions...

Luke 15:1 Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

The religious leaders were upset with Jesus, because sadly they, and many people in Jesus's day, believed God wanted nothing more than to punish sinners. They thought He found the most joy in casting them into hell. So for Jesus to receive sinners and eat with them was greatly upsetting.

Jesus taught these parables to show the Lord wants nothing more than to see sinners repent and come to salvation. He finds the most joy in seeing them repent of their sins and be saved.

Here's the second misconception Jesus destroyed with this parable...

Luke 15:18 [The prodigal son said], “I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.”

The son’s thinking captured the common thinking of the day about God the Father:

- You better approach Him very cautiously and know exactly what you’re going to say.
- If you sin badly enough, you are no longer worthy to be God’s son or daughter.
- If you repent and turn back to God, you will spend the rest of your life as nothing more than a servant or slave.

Jesus preached this parable and showed this thinking is wrong.

We know from **Hebrews 4:16** that we can **come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.**

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This morning, I want to show you one more misconception dispelled by this parable, but it requires doing some digging into Scripture.

Look at **Acts 17:16**...

Acts 17:16 Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.

Paul saw all this idolatry and it greatly distressed him, and it should distress us for the same reasons:

- He was distressed for God, and if we love God, it should distress us when we see people worship idols.
- He was distressed for the people, and if we love people, it should distress us when they engage in idolatry.

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Look at **verse 17**...

Acts 17:17 So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.

You get the impression Paul preached constantly, regardless of the location or time. He preached **in the synagogue** to the Jews **and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.** Basically, if people would listen – and probably even if they wouldn’t listen – Paul preached to them.

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This verse begins with the word **So**, or in the NKJV it says **Therefore**.

- This connects **verse 17** to **verse 16**.
- Paul preached the Gospel **in the synagogue and in the marketplace every day** because **his spirit was provoked within him**.

His burden moved him to evangelize. It wouldn’t be very significant if Paul had a burden, but didn’t do anything about it.

The application for us is if we’re burdened for others, it should lead to action on our part too:

- We should be praying for people’s salvation
- We should be looking for opportunities to share the Gospel and lead people through the Exchange

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So, let me ask...

Is your spirit provoked within you when you look at your neighborhood, or workplace, or city and see people engaged in idolatry?

We should be what **1 Peter 3:15** describes...

In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.

This was Paul and it should be us too.

While he was going about this daily – and probably nightly – preaching, something truly amazing took place. He was noticed by the leading Athenian philosophers of the day. Look at **verse 18**...

Acts 17:18 Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, “What does this babbler wish to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities”—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. 19 And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?”

This is what you call an open door!

Paul planned to preach in the synagogues and marketplaces, but he got invited to preach in **the Areopagus**, where he'd get to address the leading experts of philosophy and religion.

I doubt he expected this, but I'm sure he must've been thrilled.

Notice for this morning's sermon the mention of the two dominant religious groups of the day: the Epicureans and Stoics.

In **John 4:24** Jesus said, **“God is Spirit.” John 1:18** and **1 John 4:12** say, **“No one has ever seen God.”**

Because nobody has ever seen God physically, without Scripture we are left to wonder what He is like, how He feels, and what pleases or displeases Him.

The views of these two groups largely captured the view of God the Father in Jesus and Paul's day.

And this brings us to Lesson One...

Lesson One: The first century thought God the Father was impersonal and stoic.

Let me briefly tell you about each group, so you can see how the parable of the prodigal son, in particular the teaching about the father largely dispelled the common view of God in that day.

The Epicureans believed in multiple gods who were uninvolved in man's affairs. They thought the gods wouldn't want interaction with people because it would disturb their existence.

Theologically, Epicureans were pantheists. They thought God is everyone and everything. A tree is God, a rock is God, an animal is God, the sky is God, the sun is God, people are God. They didn't think God was personal or relational.

Stoic means not showing feelings or emotions. Synonyms would be apathetic, uncaring, or indifferent.

Stoics taught that logic controlled the universe. They placed thinking above feeling and believed the chief goal of life was reaching a place of indifference to pleasure or pain. They stressed discipline, virtue, and self-control. They wanted to be self-sufficient, and unmoved by feelings or outward circumstances.

This is why they were called Stoics and their religion was called Stoicism.

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Now here is what I want you to see...

It is against this backdrop – that God the Father is impersonal, stoic, unemotional, unattached from His creation – that Jesus preached this parable. It would've been like a bomb going off.

I believe Jesus wanted to reveal the heart of God the Father so people would know He is the opposite of the commonly held views...and this brings us to lesson two...

Lesson Two: The Prodigal Son's Father (Part One) feels deeply.

The magnificent attribute of God that sets Him apart from all the idols invented by man is that He is not indifferent or unfeeling or unemotional. Instead, He is passionate, emotional, and joyful...and the parable of the prodigal son makes this clear.

Listen to these beautiful verses describing God feeling deeply...

Isaiah 62:5 For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your sons marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, SO SHALL YOUR GOD REJOICE OVER YOU.

Aside from perhaps the way parents rejoice over their children, few things cause people to rejoice as much as a groom over his bride.

But this verse says God rejoices over us the same way. That is incredible!

Zephaniah 3:17 The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; HE WILL REJOICE OVER YOU WITH GLADNESS; he will quiet you by his love; he will EXULT OVER YOU WITH LOUD SINGING.

We don't often think of God singing, but He does...over us. This is how much joy He takes in us: He breaks into song!

That's a pretty wild thought, isn't it? God singing loudly over us!

Spurgeon said, *"Think of the great Jehovah singing! Can you imagine it? Is it possible to conceive of the Deity breaking into a song: Father, Son and Holy Spirit together singing over the redeemed? God is so happy in the love which he bears to his people that he breaks the eternal silence, and sun and moon and stars with astonishment hear God chanting a hymn of joy."*

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Now as far as what causes God joy, or what causes God to rejoice, we know based on these parables it is sinners repenting. God longs to see sinners repent and be saved and He rejoices when they do.

1 Timothy 2:4 [God] desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

John MacArthur wrote, *"From the fall to the consummation, God has been and will be seeking to save sinners, and rejoicing each time one repents and is converted."*

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Now let me introduce you to something and then I will explain its relationship to the parable...

Anthropomorphism is a fancy sounding word that refers to God looking like a man. The word *anthropomorphism* comes from two Greek words, *anthropos*, meaning "man," and *morphe*, meaning "form."

It is almost ironic to discuss this in this morning's sermon, because if you remember last Sunday's sermon I told you that God made us in His image, but we tend to make God into our image.

Anthropomorphism is when God makes himself into our image – so it is not okay for us to do that with God, but it is okay when God chooses to do that Himself.

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We see anthropomorphism in Scripture when God is assigned physical attributes, characteristics, or behaviors. For example:

- **Exodus 7:5 and Isaiah 23:11 say He stretched out his hand**
- **Leviticus 20:6 says He sets [his] face against evil**
- **Number 6:25 says He make His face to shine on you**
- **Deuteronomy 11:12 says He keeps his eye on the land**
- **Psalm 34:15 says the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous**
- **Isaiah 66:1 says the earth is His footstool**
- **Psalm 89:10 says He scattered enemies with His strong arm**
- **Psalm 113:6 says He stoops down to look on the heavens and the earth**

We see anthropomorphism when God is given human emotions:

- Genesis 6:6 says God was sorry
- Exodus 20:5 says God is jealous
- Exodus 32:14 says God changed his mind
- Judges 2:18 says God was moved to pity
- 1 Samuel 15:35 says God was grieved He made Saul king

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Why does the Bible do this?

It does this because the primary purpose of the Bible is to allow us to understand God, so He presents Himself in human terms so we can better understand Him.

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One other approach God takes in Scripture to help us know Him, is He presents Himself as an earthly father.

He wants us to know what it's like for Him to have to sacrifice His only Son whom He loves, so He tells a father...

Genesis 22:2, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love...and offer him."

So, when we read about Abraham sacrificing Isaac, we get an idea what it was like for God to have to sacrifice His Son.

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And God wants us to know what it is like for Him when one of His wayward children who has been living in rebellion and immorality repents and returns home. He wants us to know how it causes Him to feel, so Jesus preaches this parable.

Look at verse twenty...

Luke 15:20 And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

We have reached an incredible verse in Scripture. There are verses about God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. This is my personal favorite verse about God the Father.

I was having a conversation with someone the other day about how our familiarity with certain things can cause us to see them differently. For example:

- I bet when Carl looks at plans for a building he looks at them differently than others
- I bet when Dave sees a machine he looks at it differently than others
- I bet when Jim walks onto a farm he looks at it differently than others...especially me
- I bet when DJ watches people work out he looks at them differently than others...as he criticizes their form and makes fun of them.

And I think because I write so much – whether preparing sermons or responding to emails – it has given me a greater appreciation for God’s word.

This one verse communicates so much beautiful imagery with so few words. There are multiple phrases that all communicate the father’s joy at the son’s repentance. I want to make sure that we mine all the treasures we can, so I’ll draw your attention to certain parts.

First, notice the words...

while he was still a long way off, his father saw him.

And this brings us to the next part of lesson two...

Lesson Two: The Prodigal Son’s Father (Part Two) longs for his son’s return.

Why did the father see his son when he was a long way off?

More than likely, he was waiting and looking for his son, probably every day, searching the distant road, longing for his return.

He looked even more diligently for his son than:

1. The shepherd in the first parable looked for his lost sheep
2. Or the woman in the second parable looked for her lost coin.ⁱ

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When the father finally sees him, it says...

[he] ran [to him].

That’s how much he longed for his son’s return...he couldn’t even wait until he got home.

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This shows a side of God the Father that we might not see any place else in Scripture. I say that because normally He looks slow and patient. But here He looks excited and anxious.

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I told you at the beginning of the parable that the father’s behavior would have been shocking to Jesus’s listeners...

First, people would have gasped when Jesus said the father gave his rebellious, disrespectful son his inheritance.

Second, people would have been shocked when the father ran toward his son, because honorable, dignified men wouldn’t behave like this. People ran to them. Not the other way around.

But the father was so overcome with joy at seeing his son he broke cultural norms. He wasn’t ashamed to gather up his robes and run to meet his son.ⁱⁱ

Next, look at the words...

embraced him and kissed him.

This is another thing that would've shocked Jesus's listeners, because an honorable, dignified man also wouldn't embrace his rebellious son and lavish him with kisses...especially while he was more than likely covered in pig slop...filthy...and stinking. But when the Father saw him, He ran to him, threw his arms around him, and kissed him!

And this brings us to the next part of Lesson Two...

Lesson Two: The Prodigal Son's Father (Part Three) is affectionate.

The Greek word for embraced literally means the father fell on his son's neck.ⁱⁱⁱ

The son might have kissed the father's hand, or even his feet, but it seems like the father prevented this by kissing him profusely on the cheek or the forehead:

- The Greek word for kiss is *kataphileo* and it means "to kiss much, kiss tenderly, kiss again and again."
- Henry Morris said, "*The tense of the Greek indicates he repeatedly kissed his son.*"

My youngest son, George, is less than one-year-old and I kiss him profusely. My oldest sons, Ricky and Johnny, are thirteen and eleven. I kiss them too, but I kiss them differently than I kiss George.

A couple months ago I was at a conference out east and a friend drove a couple hours to see me. When we parted ways, he gave me a very intense hug and held on for a long time. Then he kissed me. I think this is the only time any man has kissed me besides my dad or my sons.

I believe he was obeying this verse...

2 Corinthians 13:12 Greet one another with a holy kiss.

My whole point in sharing this is kissing is very intimate and personal. Picturing a grown man repeatedly kiss his son would've been a very intimate scene, demonstrating the father's affection.

What application do I think this has for us since God can't show us physical affection?

I believe it communicates God's tender affection toward us and how much he loves us...but not when we have been good and obedient. Instead, when we have repented after living in rebellion.

If you're a parent, you probably understand this...

Our children might rebel – and might even say terrible things to us – but we can never stop loving them.

We can be loving, but God is love. Imagine the love we can have for our children as sinful selfish parents. Then imagine how much greater love a perfect, good God can have for repentant sinners.

The last part of lesson two...

Lesson Two: The Prodigal Son's Father (Part Four) doesn't force.

Notice that the son has not even said he's sorry yet. The Father starts loving on the son before he even gets a word out.

You might circle or underline **Luke 15:20**. It is one of most beautiful verses in the entire Bible. It describes what God the Father wants to do with us – even when we might feel like the Prodigal Son. We will never sin in a manner that makes God want anything other than to have us return to Him so He can run to us, embrace us, and kiss us.

But there is a limit that I wanted to mention...

As much as the father wanted to see his son return, I couldn't help noticing what he did NOT do:

- He didn't force his son to return home
- He didn't head into Gentile territory and search the towns, and ask all of the people if they had seen him.

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I'd like to address the parents here...

Just as the Father doesn't force us to repent, so we can't force our children to repent. We can't force salvation on them.

We may be able to force good behavior on them for a period of time, but their hearts will be revealed at some point. Even an ungodly teacher can get his students to obey outwardly so they don't get in trouble. But genuine repentance is born out of changed hearts. No amount of discipline can save children. They must repent and put faith in Christ for themselves.

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Let me conclude with this...

Be encouraged that the Father wants us to repent, He longs for us to do so, and He will rejoice when it happens...but He will not force it.

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At this time we have a baptism.

After that I will be up front after service, and if you have any questions about anything I've shared, or I can pray for you in any way I would consider it a privilege to speak with you.

Let's pray.

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ⁱ We think of the language of **2 Peter 3:9**...

2 Peter 3:9 The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

ⁱⁱ Phillips, Craig and Dean wrote a song called He Ran to Me. Here's part of the lyrics...

*Almighty God the great I am
The only time I ever saw him run
Was when He ran to me
He took me in his arms
Held my head to his chest
Said my son's come home again
Lifted my face
Wiped the tears from my eyes
With forgiveness in his voice He said
Son do you know I still love you*

ⁱⁱⁱ Picture these examples in Scripture and you will have the right idea:

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- **Genesis 33:4 Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.**
 - **Genesis 45:14 Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, and Benjamin wept upon his neck.**
 - **Genesis 46:29 Then Joseph prepared his chariot and went up to meet Israel his father in Goshen. He presented himself to him and fell on his neck and wept on his neck a good while.**