

I. Today we finish our series on the Parables – at least for now. There will be additional parables later in Luke. But that will need to wait a while. Because ready or not, next weekend kicks off Advent – the four weekends that lead us up to Christmas during which time we are to be preparing our hearts for the arrival of the Son of God.

A. But we can't get ahead of ourselves just yet. Today we finish up this brief series on the Parables – these ingenious stories that Jesus tells, inviting us to step into them and look around so we can see things (about God and ourselves) that we might not otherwise be able to see. Today we look at the most famous parable of all – I am talking about the Parable of the Prodigal Son. It is found in Luke 15, beginning with verse 12.

1. There is a translation that reads: <sup>1</sup> “Feeling footloose and frisky, a feather-brained fellow forced his fond father to fork over the farthings. He flew far to foreign fields and frittered his fortune, feasting fabulously with faithless friends.” If you like that kind of thing, you can find the whole parable in that form in the sermon notes online.

B. I am going to read it from the NIV:

1. Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup> The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.

2. <sup>13</sup> “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. <sup>14</sup> After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup> So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. <sup>16</sup> He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

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<sup>1</sup> Feeling footloose and frisky, a feather-brained fellow forced his fond father to fork over the farthings. He flew far to foreign fields and frittered his fortune, feasting fabulously with faithless friends. Finally facing famine and fleeced by his fellows-in-folly, he found himself a feed-flinger in a filthy farmyard. Fairly famishing, he fain would have filled his frame with foraged food from the fodder fragments. "Foey, my father's flunkies fare far fancier." The frazzled fugitive fumed feverishly, frankly facing facts. Frustrated by failure and filled with foreboding he fled forthwith to his family. Falling at his father's feet, he floundered forlornly, "Father, I have flunked and fruitlessly forfeited family favor..." But the faithful father, forestalling further flinching, frantically flagged the flunkies to fetch forth the finest fatling and fix a feast. The fugitive's fault-finding frater frowned on the fickle forgiveness of former folderol. His fury flashed—but fussing was futile. The far-sighted father figured, "Such filial fidelity is fine, but what forbids fervent festivity—for the fugitive is found! Unfurl the flags. With fanfares flaring, let fun and frolic freely flow. Former failure is forgotten, folly forsaken. Forgiveness forms the foundation for future fortitude."

3. <sup>17</sup>“When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! <sup>18</sup> I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. <sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ <sup>20</sup> So he got up and went to his father.

4. “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.

5. <sup>21</sup>“The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

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

7. <sup>25</sup>“Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup> So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. <sup>27</sup> ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

8. <sup>28</sup>“The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. <sup>29</sup> But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

9. <sup>31</sup>“‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. <sup>32</sup> But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

II. Introduction: In a series entitled *The Storyteller* we now come to “The Story.” At least, if ever a story deserved to be called the story this story is that story.

III. I am referring to The Prodigal Son, which Charles Dickens called the greatest story ever told. This parable has inspired great art, poetry and music. Shakespeare wrote about it.<sup>2</sup> Rembrandt painted scenes from it. And almost everyone seems to know it – however, I would argue that many people misunderstand it.

IV. There are several things going on in Prodigal Son – which, by the way, is not an official name. The title of the Parable is not inspired. In fact, it's a bit misleading.

V. But noting that is not nearly as important as noting this: one of the main things you need to learn from this parable is that God loves you. Even when we've been idiots and fools God loves us with an amazing and overwhelming love, because the love of God does not depend on our being loveable but on God's nature.

1. There are two "God is" statements in the Bible: In John 4 we are told that "God is Spirit;" and in I John 4 we are told that "God is love." In this sermon, Jesus drives this home.

2. And he does more than that as we will see.

VI. As you may remember from last week, this story is the third of three, and the entire section opens with the line: **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." Then Jesus told them this parable.**

A. The Pharisees were sitting in judgment of Jesus – they were harrumphing and otherwise looking down their nose at him – because of the undesirables he was hanging out with. And Jesus is attacking their self-righteous, religiously-proud attitude.<sup>3</sup> In response he tells them three stories. The story of the lost sheep and the story of the lost coin set up the story of the lost son.

1. Each story has three moving parts: something lost, something found and Jesus. In the 1<sup>st</sup> story "the lost" was a sheep. In the second it's a coin. In the first story "the other" was the 99 sheep, then it's nine coins. In the 1<sup>st</sup> story, Jesus was a Shepherd; in the second he is a peasant woman. In both cases Christ finds what was lost and rejoices.

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<sup>2</sup> See Darryl Tippens, *Shakespeare and the Prodigal Son Tradition*.

<sup>3</sup> The Pharisees believe that part of the way they have obtained their holiness is through careful separation from things – such as sinners! One of the points Jesus makes – and Luke emphasizes – is Jesus's care for everyone, including prominent sinners, Gentiles, etc.

B. Now we move to the main story, which follows the same pattern: the younger son (the prodigal)<sup>4</sup> is like the lost sheep and coin. The older brother (the other) is like the 99 sheep or 9 coins. And God, who has been a shepherd and a peasant woman is now the Father. But there is a twist. Stay tuned.

## VII. 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.'

A. If we read this through 21<sup>st</sup> century Western eyes – which celebrates youth; where family may mean an adult or two plus a child or two, but no one else. And where people think little of moving across the country to get a better job, then the young son's actions may seem a bit forward; his asking for some cash up front suggests that he's a bit entitled, perhaps a tad crass. But not terribly so. No more so than many entitled kids. His request is reasonable.

B. If we read this through 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish eyes, where old age was honored and the family was primary – and by family we mean grandma and grandpa and cousins and aunts and Uncles. And where you didn't move away because you were expected to take care of your parents as they grew older – and where you didn't spend the family money, you passed it along to the next in line – then we read this very differently. In that context we understand the son's request like this: Hey old man, can you hurry up and die already. I am in a hurry to get out of this dump. At the very least, can you at least have the decency to hand over my share of this estate now? Today. Right away!

1. In this context the request – while not exactly illegal – is unthinkable. It breaks a relationship, it breaks up a family and it breaks a Father's heart. Dr. Kenneth Bailey, a New Testament scholar who spent forty years teaching the Gospels in the Middle East (mostly in Arabic), says that every time he taught this parable he would ask, "Has anyone ever made such a request in your village." The answer was always, "No." It was unthinkable. And the universal belief was that if it ever was asked, the father, who would be furious and would deny it. The division of a father's wealth would happen at his death. So what is going on here is a mutiny. The son is only thinking about himself.

C. But in the story Jesus tells, the father complies, dividing his property between his two sons. The younger would have received one-third. The older two-thirds as was the custom.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The word *prodigal* does not mean "wayward;" it actually means "lavish" or "abundant." The son was lavish in sin and his father was lavish in grace. It is related to *prodigious*.

<sup>5</sup> The older son gets two-thirds in part because he has greater responsibilities for caring for the extended family.

**VIII. "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had,"**

A. The young man's share of the estate would have likely been land and livestock – neither or which he is going to take with him. Which means he sold it all quickly, which means he sold it at a deep discount. In those days negotiations took years. If you're in a hurry, as he was, you got pennies on the dollar. Clearly, this is a train wreck. The economic gain of generations is being squandered by his actions.

**IX. So the father divided his property between them. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country<sup>6</sup> and there squandered his wealth in wild living.**

A. The boy went to Vegas – with all that implies.<sup>7</sup> And he discovers that sin is always more expensive than the advertised price. It's never a good investment. If we let it, it will take everything we have and leave us with nothing.

B. **After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country** – Stocks drop. The Dow loses thirty percent! – **and he began to be in need.**<sup>8</sup> **So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs.** The boy falls hard and. This is not a huge surprise. But these few verses do tell us a lot.

C. He is being tossed aside. I've been told that you don't get fired in the Middle East, you get reassigned. You are offered a job that no one expects you to take. That is what is going on here. The young Jewish boy is assigned to work with pigs, something no one believes he will do because they are ceremonially unclean.

D. He has not only left the family, he's left his people. The presence of pigs tell us that he is living among the Gentiles. He has gone over to the dark side.

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<sup>6</sup> One writer suggests that a "distant country" is anywhere we go when we try to flee from God. Another notes that this distant land always turns out to be like cotton candy – i.e., it may look pretty, but just seems to disappear. It does not deliver what we need. The "far country is a land of deception."

<sup>7</sup> There is a bit of a debate as to exactly how he lost the money. Most envision something akin to a first century Las Vegas, but some argue that he likely tried to use the money to buy favor in the new town – i.e., that he spent lavishly to make a name for himself. Whatever the case, the money was soon gone.

<sup>8</sup> He discovers the truth of Proverbs 14:20, "The poor are shunned even by their neighbors, but the rich have many friends."

1. He has burned his bridges. Earlier I mentioned that losing the family money was bad. Well, losing it to the Gentiles is even worse. So bad, in fact, that when it happened there was a special ceremony to cut you off from the family forever. It was called a Kezazah. If a Jew who lost the family inheritance among Gentiles dared to return home the entire community – because in a sense the entire community has suffered – the community would break a large pot in front of him and cry out – “So-in-so is cut off from his people.” Going home is not an option. Even if he was willing to swallow his pride and limp home, it’s unlikely he would be allowed to stay.<sup>9</sup> Going home is not an option.

E. So, imagine how the Pharisees are hearing all of this. At this point, they probably love this story. That no-good, ungrateful, immoral sorry excuse of a Jewish man. He didn’t listen to us and went to the Gentiles. He got what he deserved. Let him live with the pigs. I would never do anything like that.

F. They might also be thinking, I love stories with happy endings like this! Where people see the superiority of the path I advocate.

G. In other words – they do not see what is coming!

X. **V15: 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.** It’s actually worse than just tending to the pigs. He realizes that the pigs are eating better than he is. V17: **“When he came to his senses,<sup>10</sup> he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ So he got up and went to his father.**

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<sup>9</sup> The younger son would now be dependent upon his older brother because 100 percent of what the father has left belongs to him.

<sup>10</sup> He may have been thinking, “I will turn this around. I’ll be fine. I am going to start at the bottom but climb to the very top. He had wild plans of being a successful pig farmer.” But eventually he realized the kind of trouble he was in.

A. Going home is not an option. But he decides to go home. And here is where things get interesting. In fact, what happens next is shocking. Tragically, to appreciate how shocking it is requires a sense of propriety and honor no longer found in Western culture. Few of us can begin to understand why a Japanese executive would end their life if something bad happened on their watch. Over the last fifty years we've become virtually "un-shameable."<sup>11</sup> So we can't fully appreciate all the dynamics here. But several remarkable things happen: first, the boy repents; second, he goes home to ask to be taken on as a slave; and third, the father runs.

**XI. But while he was still a long way off – V:20 – his father saw him**

A. Which suggests that the father has never stopped looking. He probably got reports from others. "Your son has fallen into the wrong crowd. Your son is doing drugs. Your son probably has AIDS." He knows all of the challenges and dangers of the "distant land." But he never stops hoping and praying and watching.

B. And remember, the Father here is God. And the message is He is looking and waiting for you! And He never stops.

**XII. But while he was still a long way off – V:20 – his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.**

A. What? Wait! No! This is not what the Pharisees were expecting. For starters, in that culture men do not run.<sup>12</sup> To this day, important people do not run. (They may run for exercise, but not in the normal course of the day. Not because they are late for a meeting. Can you imagine seeing a picture of President Obama running to get to a meeting? No. He is too important to run. And at that time men wore long robes, so in order to run they had to hike up their "dress" – not a very manly thing to do – and expose their white legs.<sup>13</sup> It's not a good look!

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<sup>11</sup> I remember being shocked seeing a picture of former President Clinton flying on a commercial flight. For one who had commanded Air Force One and been surrounded by secret service the picture was shocking. Of course, for the record, God is not against humility. Christ humbled himself. He gave up heaven in order to be taken on human form. That act – in and of itself – is profane. Is violent beyond our comprehension. For the creator to become part of the creation is to descend far more than any person can fall. Jesus models humility.

<sup>12</sup> The Greek word that is used here for run does not mean "jog." It is the word for raced.

<sup>13</sup> Bailey – the Middle Eastern scholar says – men over 25 do not run. Period.

B. But this is what the father – the God figure in our parable – does. He runs through the community. No doubt doing so to greet his son and in order to prevent anyone from shaming him or breaking the pot and pronouncing that he was cut off. Please see what is happening: The Father shames himself to prevent anyone from shaming His son. There is apparently no length to which he will not go - no humiliation he would not suffer – in order to get his son back.

C. Jesus is telling a story in which a Father runs to meet a prodigal. Jesus is telling a story in which the God figure swallows his pride, willingly embracing the one who has shamed the family, told him to drop dead and burned through their money.

D. Jesus is telling a story in which God runs after an indignant, rebellious and sinful child. God runs. This is amazing.

**XIII. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him (he knew that walk a long way off) and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'**

A. The boy repents. He confesses His sin. He doesn't dismiss it as "boys being boys" or just the normal acts of a young man "sowing some wild oats." He doesn't blame others. He doesn't implicate his schooling, the government, his parents or Common Core testing. He doesn't push this off on the Republicans or Democrats or the mainstream media or ISIS. He doesn't call what happened a "mistake." He owns his sin<sup>14</sup> and he takes action.

B. To *confess* means to "call it the same thing." When we confess we agree with God that our actions were willful acts of disobedience.

C. To repent does not simply mean we feel sorry that we've been caught or to be upset that things are not working out; nor does it mean simply "to feel sorry for what we've done." It goes past that. It means to turn around. The boy turns around.

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<sup>14</sup> At the very least he was guilty of selfishness and breaking the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment. The suggestion of wild life in a distant land suggests other sins as well.

**XIV. 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.<sup>15</sup> The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' "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.**

A. The robe reflects honor. It elevates him. When Pharaoh promoted Joseph he gave him his robe. The ring – sometimes called a signet ring<sup>16</sup> - represents his ability to act with the authority of his father. Being given a ring is a bit like being given a credit card. And putting shoes on his feet was a statement that he would be treated like a son not a slave. Slaves were barefoot, sons had shoes.<sup>17</sup>

**XV. And then the father says, V22: “Bring the fattened calf and kill it.**

A. I heard a comedian note that there were two on the farm who were not happy that the Prodigal returned: the older brother and the fattened calf.

**XVI. V22: “Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.**

A. This is not what the Pharisees would have expected. Nor is it what many of us would recommend.<sup>18</sup> We'd be thrilled to see our child and say something like, “Let's go get your Mom right now. She will be so happy. She is dying to see you. By the way, you're grounded for the next twenty-five years. Maybe longer.”

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<sup>15</sup> In Palestinian culture, a kill is a sign of full acceptance and friendship.

<sup>16</sup> A signet ring was what a king gave to his prime minister. It meant that the person who was wearing it had the authority of the king.

<sup>17</sup> Someone reportedly asked Abraham Lincoln how he was going to treat the rebellious Southerners after the war is over. He replied, “I will treat them as though they have never been away.” That is what the Father does – and that is what God does.

<sup>18</sup> This is especially if Bailey is right, because he sees something here I have always overlooked. He says that at this point there is no reason to believe that the prodigal is truly repentant heart. For starters, what he says is almost exactly what Pharaoh said to Moses after the 9<sup>th</sup> plague when he was trying to trick him. When he had not really repented, was just short of options. The Pharisees would not miss that; secondly, he doesn't volunteer to be a slave. He asks to get paid; and thirdly, there is nothing here to show that he understands his real offense – not that he wasted money but that he broke his father's heart.

B. But that is not what happens here! We are being given a message on grace and we are being told something very important about God's heart. He is loving and forgiving and waiting to throw a party for you.

XVII. And now things get very interesting. So, the father has hired an event coordinator and staged a big party, and the DJ was there and all of this was being done in honor of the rebel. The party was being held in his honor. He had returned. The ner-do-well who had spit in his family's face, squandered their money and kept them up with worry. **"Meanwhile..., the older son was in the field."**

A. While the Prodigal was living fast and free at the pagan brothel, the older son – Mr. Honor Society, the over-achieving first born, the one who has always tried to do what was expected of him – is out working in the field.

B. And it's probably right about now that the first of the Pharisees see where this is headed. They clue in to the fact that they are the older brother. They are the one who has stayed home and done the right thing. Worked hard. Been scandal free.

XVIII. **"Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' 'The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him.**

A. This would be very awkward. Everyone has gathered for the party. It would be expected that the older son would be acting as host. He is not, and here the father has to step away and deal with an awkward family moment.

XIX. **'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' 'The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders.**

A. Really? The older brother never disobeyed? Our ability to deceive ourselves knows few limits. This is a different kind of sin. The younger brother fell hard for the sins of the flesh – wine, women and song. Here we are learning that the older brother is just as spiritually dead. He may have appeared to be a better son, but he was rotten on the inside. He didn't love the father. His identity was all wrapped up in being thought well of.

**XX. 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'**

A. The older son says, "Are you crazy? Have you taken leave of your senses? My loser of a brother has played us. He's shamed us. He told you to drop dead and left me to do all the work. I don't ever want to see him again. I'm embarrassed he shares my last name. I cannot believe you are throwing a party for him – with my money! (Remember, the Prodigal got his share of the estate, so everything that is left belongs to the older son). I cannot believe you are doing this. Especially when you have never done this for me. I'm not walking into that party.

B. Again, this is bad! When the older brother refuses to come into the party that the father is throwing for the brother, he is bringing more shame to the father.

C. In his defense, the older brother had been doing a lot right – especially in his own mind. He was industrious and thrifty. He didn't gamble away their assets. His conduct was not scandalous. He avoided immorality. He did some things right.

D. But... he sure didn't love. Nor did he look out for his brother. In that culture the oldest son – the one getting two-thirds of the wealth – was expected to keep the family together. He didn't.<sup>19</sup> And now he is causing a scene by making his father leave the party and plead.

**XXI. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'** 'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' "

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<sup>19</sup> FYI: Bailey notes that when he tells this story in a Middle Eastern village everyone wants to know where the older brother is. They wonder why he didn't stop this. Extended families have rules. One is that people are expected to act as mediators when conflict breaks out. Those in the Middle East who hear this story all believe that that job belongs to the older brother. He is supposed to referee this fight. It is his sacred responsibility. Even if he hated his brother he should do this for his father's sake. The fact that he does not speaks loudly of his failures.

A. So, what is going on here? I want to be sure you get this. Many do not. The fool in this story – the loser, the bad example – is not actually the Prodigal who skipped town, lost the money and then limped home. In this story – that Jesus makes up to make a point – the the person you do not want to be is the older brother. Jesus is telling this story to the Pharisees and the person you do not want to be is a Pharisee.

B. The moral of this story is: do not be a self-important religious prude. Jesus is issuing an indictment here against religion and religious pride and by extension, against the Pharisees. And against us anytime we think we are better than anyone else.

## XXII. What are we supposed to learn from this?

A. The first thing is – a point I’ve been making over and over lately - religion doesn’t work.

1. Please hear this. There are two ways to be lost: to rebel against God, or to be a religious. Religion doesn’t work. We cannot be good enough to reach up to God. Christianity is not a religion. Christianity is not a religion. In fact, in some ways it is the anti-religion. It is the declaration that God reaches down

2. Let me repeat this in a slightly different manner: there are two ways to be lost – to rebel against God or to be religiously self-righteous. To turn your back on God, or to think: I’m doing better than most people!

3. On most days, I manage to be both at the same time: a rebel and a Pharisee. I suppose most of us default one way or the other.<sup>20</sup>

a) Rebels are into innovation – new lifestyles, I’m not going to be bound by the past attitudes, no limits, I’m free. Pharisees like tradition, want to keep the customs – in fact, they often care more about them than they do about people. They pine for the “good old days.” Rebels tend to identify with the term liberal; Pharisees tend to identify with the term conservative. With rebellion the sin is usually visible. With Pharisee-ism it’s usually not. Rebellion is into unrighteousness; the Pharisees are into self-righteousness.

4. But neither work. Please see this – in some ways this is the main point of the Parable – Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees and he is making the point that religion doesn’t work.

B. Number Two: God will take us back. God will take you back.

<sup>20</sup> This is a point developed by Mark Driscoll in his sermon on this parable.

1. Men and women, God is the Father figure and he runs to welcome the rebellious, unemployed party-animal back home.
  2. The portrayal of God in this parable – told by Jesus – is that God is like a love-sick puppy who is waiting for a chance to run back to you! He cares more about you than he does about your sin. He wants you back. He will go to virtually any lengths to make this happen.<sup>21</sup>
- C. Three: We need to repent.
1. How do we get back? We repent. We confess our sin (i.e., we own it) and we repent (we turn around) God will do the rest.
  2. Please get that this applies to everyone. Not just the prodigals; not just the rebels. It applies to Pharisees. When we see who God is – as we grow in our understanding of who He is – we should also be growing in our understanding of how broken we are. How shallow. How self-important. Which leads us to see how stupid are pride is. And to confess it as sin. Let me be clear, you should either be repenting for deliberate rebellion against God, or stupid, heinous self-importance, or both.
- D. Number Four: One of the hardest things in the world to do is to stop being the prodigal son without turning into the elder brother.<sup>22</sup>
1. I'm sure you've seen this. But often times, as soon as someone starts to walk a more virtuous path, they get all uppity and smug about it. It's very easy to be the elder brother. In fact, if you are not identifying as the Prodigal you should assume you are the elder brother. If you do not identify as the Prodigal you should assume you are the older brother.
- E. Number Five: We need to get the story out.

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<sup>21</sup> Years ago – in a business workshop - I remember a speaker asking a woman if she would walk across a plank that was about a foot wide if it was laying on the ground. She said yes. He asked, “and if I raise it up 3 feet?” And she said, “yes.” “And if I raise it up 6 feet?” And she said, no. And then he offered her 100 dollars and she said yes. He then hypothetically raised the bar – this is an old illustration – he raised it to span the distance b/w the World Trade Towers in NYC and asked if she would walk across it? She said she would not. Not even for 1 million dollars. He then asked, would you walk across in order to rescue one of your children? And she said, “without hesitation.” Well, she actually asked, “Which child?” Great laugh line. But she quickly said, “I would walk any plank for any of my kids without ever thinking about it.” The Bible tells us that God so loved the world – you - that he walked the plank. He died to span the gap. God the Father ran. Men and women – there is so much to learn about God. So many amazing things to know. But the first thing I want to be sure you hear is that He loves his children. We have betrayed him. We are the prodigals. We've rebelled. We have broken his heart. We have brought dishonor on his name. In many cases we are not nearly as repentant as we are desperate. He stands watching the horizon for our return. And when he sees us, He runs.

<sup>22</sup> This is a quote made by John Ortberg.

1. We need to tell people that there is a third way: it's not religion or irreligion. It is the Gospel. It's to lean into God's grace. It's to turn into the welcoming arms of God the Father.

2. Please understand, we are not inviting people to "be good people like us," We are not suggesting that they come "live the good life like we do, think and act and dress like we do." When the average person gets an invitation to attend Church or show up at a Bible study they think they are being invited to become an older brother. They think it's an invitation to be more moral or vote Republican. We have a lot of work to do to communicate the Gospel, which is the shocking, scandalous, unbelievable news that God runs! That God loves broken, rebellious people and offers eternal life.

3. Which leads to the final point

F. Number Six: There is a third brother.

1. Earlier I noted that, in the Jewish culture of Christ's day, one of the things they would hear in this story is that the older brother had failed his younger sibling. He should have gone and rescued him. But he didn't. He failed.

2. But there is a third brother – it is the one telling the story, Jesus – and he doesn't fail. He goes on the rescue mission and he makes a way back for the rebel. He knows the Father's heart to see the rebel be returned and so he goes to the distant land and suffers for his younger brother, but he pays all his debts and makes it possible for the Prodigal to return with great rejoicing.

3. Men and women – the perfect elder brother is available to save you. We are all Prodigals. We have all rebelled. But the firstborn of all creation came to make things right.