

INTRODUCTION

What is God really like? Some people think the most important question of life is “Do you believe in God?” But a more important question is “What *kind* of God do you believe in?” There is something worse than being an atheist - it is believing in God, but having an erroneous concept of God. There are many religions in the world that present many differing pictures of God and they all may contain a little truth. A stopped clock is right twice a day, but actually a broken clock is worse than no clock at all because it gives you misleading information. You can believe in God, but if you have a false conception of God, you are no better off than an atheist.

What is God really like? Is He the God of the Muslim terrorists? Is God really named Allah and does he reward murdering terrorists who hijack airplanes and kill innocent people? Does He want all the infidels killed, even if it means strapping a bomb to your body and killing yourself? Is God like the impersonal god of the Deists? Deism teaches God created the world like a watchmaker, and then he wound it up and started it. But now, he sits by uncaring or unable to get involved in what is happening in lives of individuals. Hinduism teaches there are a number of gods and goddesses, but the greatest god is Brahmin, the impersonal but all pervasive life force in every person. The New-Agers teach god is the life force in everything, that’s why they can worship trees, crystals, and even themselves. Is that what God is like? Is He Allah? Is He a watchmaker God? Is He Brahmin? Is the good side of the Force in the Star Wars movies?

Jesus Christ came to planet earth to show us exactly what God is like. In Luke 15, He shares three beautiful stories that paint a portrait of the character and nature of God. Last week we looked at the lost sheep and the lost coin. Today let’s look at the story of the lost son:

Jesus continued: “There was man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them. 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. After he had spent everything, there was severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. 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. When he came to his senses, he said, ‘how many of my father’s hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! 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 men.’ So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. 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. 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.”

Although this is often called the parable of the Prodigal Son, the key figure in the parable is the Father. I prefer to call it the Parable of the Loving Father. Jesus is teaching us the God of the

Universe is like the father in this story. It’s not enough to believe in God; you must understand the nature of the God Jesus came to introduce. The wonder and beauty of the character of God can be easily seen in this beautiful parable. We can learn three important things about God. We worship:

1. A GOD WHO REGRETS YOUR REBELLION

In the story, the younger son demanded to receive his inheritance although his father is still alive. According to Jewish law, a father who had two sons was to leave 2/3 of his estate to his older son and 1/3 to his younger son. This younger son came to his dad and said, “I know you’re gonna’ drop dead someday, but I don’t want to wait—give it to me now.” The Father was wounded by this harsh demand, but he granted it. He probably had to take some time to sell some of his land or livestock or liquidate other assets, but he eventually comes up with 1/3 of his net worth and hands it to his younger son.

Immediately the son takes the money and runs. He walks out of his father’s life and heads for the “far country.” Here is a perfect example of a rebellious, disrespectful child. We can tell from the way he welcomed him back that the Father’s heart was broken when his son left home. I think the father shed many tears over his son’s foolish behavior.

Clearly, the Father in this parable represents God. He is a loving Father who will let you walk away from fellowship with Him if you desire, but it breaks His Fatherly heart when you do. But whom does the prodigal son represent? Some people say he represents a person who has never been saved, but I think it’s obvious the younger son represents those of us who already have a relationship with God. He is our Father and we are His children. There’s a very important principle you must understand. You cannot sever your *relationship* with God—but you can certainly break *fellowship* with Him. The whole time the prodigal son was away, he was still a son, but He had left the presence and favor of his Father. Christians can do that, too.

Once you become a Christian, God establishes a love relationship with you. He is your Father and nothing can ever change that. But if you choose to rebel and disobey the Father, He’ll allow it. He will never leave you, but if walk out of fellowship with Him—He will let you go.

“I love you—so you’re free to go.”

The God of the Universe has a message for you today. He is saying to you, “I love you, so you are free to go.” God loves you so much He will never force you to stay in fellowship with Him. So, if you are bound and determined to do something as foolish as walking out on God, He won’t stop you. That’s how some of you have gotten into the mess you’re in right now. He doesn’t coerce obedience and loyalty from you; He wants you to freely love and serve Him.

I was talking to a man a few years ago who at one time was a deeply committed Christian, a servant of Jesus Christ. I have no doubt he is a child of God, but a few years ago, he got messed up in sexual sin and committed adultery and ended up leaving his family. He’s miserable today, even bitter toward God. He made a statement to me one time I thought was interesting. He spoke of when he first started getting involved with the “other woman.” He said, “If it was so wrong,

why didn't God stop it?” It was almost as if he was blaming God a little. Doesn't God have all the power? Couldn't he have shot a lightning bolt down and warned the guy? He could have—but He didn't.

God didn't stop that guy for the same reason He didn't stop Adam and Eve from eating the fruit. God didn't stop it for the same reason He didn't stop King David from having sex with Bathsheba. God didn't stop it for the same reason the father in this parable didn't fling himself across the door and say, “Stop it son, I won't let you leave!” That's not the nature of God. He loves you so much He allows you to make you own choices, even though He knows what the consequences will be. Just as the father grieved because his son walked out, even so, God the Father grieves when one of His children walk out of fellowship with Him.

Some of you are parents of prodigals; I'll have a word for you at the end of this message. Those of you who have prodigal children or grandchildren in your family know the kind of pain the Father feels. You know what it is to have grown children who are alienated from you and it hurts. When they were little you could discipline them, but now you only feel the pain. God hurts even more—why? Because the greater the capacity to love, the greater the capacity to be hurt. And God's love is stronger than any human love, and that's why His pain is greater, too.

Let's learn a second truth about the nature of God. We worship:

2. A GOD WHO RUNS WHEN YOU RETURN

The wayward son didn't fare so well in the far country. He lived high on the hog for a while, but pretty soon he was low with the hogs! Jesus uses six words in verse 13 to describe what happened: He “squandered his wealth in wild living.” There's a lot that can be read into those words. With a pocketful of money, he headed straight for the casinos, the bars, and the strip joints, and blew all of his funds. Before he could turn around it was all gone. He ended up in a pigpen slopping hogs. Jesus said he “came to his senses” and realized a servant in his father's house had it better than he did. All of his father's farmhands got three meals a day, and he couldn't even eat the corncobs the pigs were eating! He finally reached his P.O.T.D.—the Point of Total Desperation. So, he swallowed something more tasteless than corncobs—his pride—and started the long journey back home. How does the father receive him?

Scholars have discovered a similar story to this existed among Jewish rabbis for many years before Jesus told it. In the earlier form, the younger son ran away and spent all his father's money and when he came crawling home, the father rejected him. So, as Jesus was telling this story, the Pharisees and tax collectors were thinking, “Yeah, I've heard this one before.” His audience of Pharisees and tax collectors expected Him to say, “One day the father saw his son returning. He waited with his arms crossed. The broken-down son begged his father to take him back. But the father looked away from him and said, ‘Forget it! You had your chance. You've chosen to love like a pig, now go back to your pigs. You've made your bed, now lie in it!’” In the original story the father turned his son away and told him he was getting exactly what he deserved. It was a story reflecting the Old Testament idea of strict legalism. In fact the Old Testament prescribed that a father could have a rebellious son stoned to death. Deuteronomy 21:18-21 says, “If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who does not obey...his father and

mother shall bring him to the elders and say, ‘This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a profligate and a drunkard.’ Then all the men shall stone him to death.” Some of you who have rebellious teenage sons may think that’s a great verse! That was the way the Pharisees expected the father in the story to treat his son.

That’s the normal ending of the story. But Jesus gives a surprise twist to the plot. Now, picture the father in Jesus’ parable. His heart was broken when his son left. Every day while he was gone, the father thought of the son and wondered where he was and what he was doing. Each afternoon about sundown he would walk to the edge of his property, stand at his stone fence and look down the road that had taken his son away. He was looking, longing, hoping that one day his son would return. Then one afternoon, he sees a bent over figure dragging along the road. It can’t be his son, because his son always had a spring in his step and held his head high—and besides, this character was dressed in rags. His son always was dressed in fine clothing. But as he continued to look, there was something about the figure that looked familiar. In a flash, the father realized it was his son. Then he did an amazing thing. He jumped the stone fence and sprinted out to meet his son. Verse 20 says, “While he was still a long way off, his father saw him.” Then it says, “he was filled with compassion and he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.” The Greek verb there indicates he kept on kissing him. We would say he “smothered him with kisses.”

In the Jewish culture, men wore long robes. In order for a man to run, he had to lift the hem up and hold it high to keep from tripping over it. In doing so, he would bare his legs, which was considered highly undignified. Men of respect *never* ran; it would have been embarrassing. But can’t you see this father grabbing handfuls of robe and running toward his son? He didn’t wait for the son to reach him, he *ran* to meet the son. He hugged and kissed his rebellious son before the son said one word! Remember the son had been working in the pigpen. He looked and smelled awful, not exactly the kind of person you want to hug and kiss! The father could have said, “Oh, you’re back—good. Clean yourself up before you come into this house!” But instead, the father accepted him “just as he was.”

“When you start home, I’ll meet you more than halfway!”

And God the Father, the Creator of the Universe will welcome you the same way—just as you are. Now, this is a revolutionary portrayal of God. Jesus said God *runs* to meet us when we decided to return to Him. Some of you have drifted out of fellowship with God. You have walked away from the presence of your heavenly Father. You see, whenever you choose to sin and disobey God, you are leaving His holy presence. Right now, do you sense God is far away from you? God didn’t walk away from you; when you sinned, you walked away from him. But God is a loving heavenly Father who is longing for you to return. He is looking for you to return to Him. Wayward and backslidden child of God, He has a message for you today. With tender words of compassion He is saying to you: “When you start home, I’ll meet you more than halfway.” I love the song that says, “If you’ll take one step toward the Savior, my friend, you’ll find His arms open wide. Receive Him and all of your darkness will end; within your heart He’ll abide.”

What is God really like? Some people see Him as some mean ogre who sits on a mysterious throne watching you, just waiting you to make a mistake, so he can grab you and say, “Uh huh! I

gotcha now!” That’s not the God Jesus described. Instead, He is a loving, compassionate God who deeply cares about you.

As I said, it’s not enough to simply believe in God, you must believe in the God of the Bible. But the good news is the God of the Bible is fully of love and mercy. I love the way the old British pastor Charles Spurgeon described this scene. He wrote:

It was not with icy eyes that the father looked on his returning son. Love filled his heart as he beheld him. There was no anger in his heart toward his son. It was true that it was all his own fault, but that did not come before his father's mind. It was the state that he was in, his poverty, his degradation, that pale face of his so wan with hunger, that touched his father to the quick. We read that the father RAN! The compassion of God is followed by swift movements. He is slow to anger, but He is quick to bless. God comes flying in the greatness of His compassion to help every poor soul that returns to Him.”

That’s what God is really like. So, we worship a God who regrets our rebellion and runs to us when we return. And finally, we worship:

3. A GOD WHO RESTORES YOU WHEN YOU REPENT

When he finally came to his senses in the pigpen, the son rehearsed the speech he was going to give to his dad. He said three things in verse 21. Two of his statements were right and one of them was wrong. First he said, “I have sinned against heaven.” That was right. Primarily, all sin is against God, so he had confessed his sin to God. Second, he confessed to his father, “and I have sinned against you.” Right again. One of the hardest things for any of us to say is, “I was wrong. Will you forgive me?” That’s what he was saying. But look at the third statement. He said, “I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” That may sound good on the surface, but there is a mistake in his thinking. He never was worthy to be called a son of his father. Since he didn’t think he deserved to be a son, he was ready to ask his father to just make him like one of his servants. The point is, he never deserved to be a son—it was all by grace! And in the same way, none of us are ever worthy to be called child of God—it is all by grace.

The father refused to entertain the idea his son would be a servant. You see, even when the son was in the far country, the *relationship* was intact; it was the *fellowship* that was broken. Immediately the father commanded his servants to bring the best robe. He took that beautiful robe and lovingly placed it around his son, covering all the filth and dirt of his mistakes. That’s a lovely picture of how God covers our sin with a robe of righteousness.

Sons often wore family rings that had the family seal engraved upon it. Stamping the ring in wax was like a signature. The son probably left with a ring, but had pawned it off long ago. The father put a new ring on his finger symbolizing his full status in the family. Slaves didn’t wear shoes, but sons did. So the father had sandals put on his son’s feet. The old Negro spiritual “All God’s chillun got shoes” was based on this verse. The Father restored everything the son had lost!

And here’s the bonus! The father commanded the fattened calf to be killed, so they could have a real Texas Barbecue! The fact the Father had been fattening up the calf makes me think he

anticipated the return of his son. Everything the son left looking for, he found back at his father’s house. He father’s love for his wayward son had never changed. But the son came back a changed man, and he would forever carry the scars and the regrets of his sinful behavior.

“I’ll treat you as if you never left!”

Have you wandered away from God? Are you willing to say, “Father I have sinned against heaven and against you?” Are you willing to return to Him? If you are, He has a message for you. He is saying, “I’ll treat you as if you never left!”

In his book, *Capital of the World*, Ernest Hemingway wrote about a father in Spain who had a son named Paco. Because of his son’s rebellion, Paco and his father were estranged. The father was bitter and angry with his son, and kicked him out of the home. After years of bitterness, the father’s anger ended and he realized his mistake. He began to look for Paco, with no results. Finally, in desperation, the father placed an ad in the Madrid newspaper. The ad read, “PACO, ALL IS FORGIVEN. MEET ME AT THE NEWSPAPER OFFICE AT 9AM TOMORROW. LOVE, YOUR FATHER.” Paco is a rather common name in Spain, and Hemingway wrote when the father arrived the next morning, there were 600 young men—all named Paco—waiting and hoping to receive the forgiveness of their fathers.”

My friend, if you need forgiveness today, Jesus offers it. Glance again at verse one in this chapter to see the audience to whom Jesus was speaking. Some were Pharisees who thought they were sinless—they didn’t need forgiveness. But there were tax collectors and other sinners there as well. Jesus was trying to tell them God is like a father who will welcome you and lovingly forgive you when you come to Him and repent of your sin.

Years ago, there was a bag lady in New York City who attended a preaching service at a Manhattan Rescue Mission. Afterwards in the line to receive soup, she mentioned to the preacher she was now ready to give her life to Jesus. She said, “I never knew until today that my name is in the Bible.” The preacher smiled and said, “What’s your name?” She said, “Edith. My name is Edith. And my name is in the Bible.” The preacher said, “I’m sorry ma’am but you must be mistaken. The name Edith never appears in the Bible.” She said, “Oh yes it does, you read it a few minutes ago!” He opened his Bible and she pointed her dirty finger to Luke 15:2. The preacher had been using the King James Version, and it says, “This man receiveth sinners and *eateth* with them.” She said, “There it is! Jesus receiveth sinners and *Edith* with them!” And indeed, the good news is Jesus does receive sinners, and Edith, and David, and Jane, and Mary, and John and anyone else who comes to Him!

CONCLUSION

We’ve seen a wonderful picture of what God is like. He is a God who regrets your rebellion, who runs when you return, and who restores you when you repent. But there are some of you today who need a different word from this parable. You aren’t the wayward son; instead you feel the pain of the father. Some of you are parents and grandparents who have prodigals in your family. Your son or daughter may be distant from you because of rebellion, a disagreement, a sinful lifestyle, a bad relationship, or they may have just walked out of your life. Whatever the reason—

you feel the pain of being out of fellowship with a child or grandchild. If you are in that condition, I have a word of comfort for you today. **To parents of Prodigals, I would say: (1) God understands your pain.** Sometimes you want to sing the old song that says, “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen.” But that’s not true because God knows and He cares. He is the suffering father in this parable. **(2) Don’t jump in the pigpen to rescue them.** In this parable, the father didn’t go to the pigpen and try to pull his son out. That would have been tragic. The son had to realize his own mistake. God used the pigpen to bring him to that realization. Some of you have kids in the pigpen right now and you want to run and rescue them. They must come to their own Point of Total Desperation before they seek God. **(3) Let them know the door is open.** Don’t go to the pigpen, but never slam the door and tell your child they are never welcome back into your home. Let them know you’ll leave the light on for them, whenever they are ready to repent. **(4) Receive them when they repent.** True fellowship can never be restored until your prodigal child has repented. They may return, but if they don’t repent, your problem is not solved; it’s only aggravated.

So, parents of Prodigals, don’t give up!

OUTLINE

1. A GOD WHO REGRETS YOUR REBELLION

“I love you—so you’re free to go.”

2. A GOD WHO RUNS WHEN YOU RETURN...

“When you start home, I’ll meet you more than halfway!”

3. A GOD WHO RESTORES YOU WHEN YOU REPENT

“I’ll treat you as if you never left!”

TO PARENTS OF PRODIGALS:

1. God understands your pain.
2. Don’t jump into the pigpen to rescue them.
3. Let them know the door is open.
4. Receive them when they repent!



DISCLAIMER: These messages are offered for your personal edification and enrichment. There is no legal copyright on this material. I have used many sources, and I have always attempted to cite any exact quotations. Any failure to cite a quote is simply an oversight on my part.

If you are a preacher or teacher, I encourage you to use this material to stimulate your own Spirit-driven imagination. Additional study beyond this material will benefit both you and your listeners. You have my full permission to use any of this material as long as you cite the source for any substantial amount used in your message.

If you borrow the majority of a message or outline, I encourage you to simply preface your remarks by saying something like: ***“Some (or “much” as the case may be) of the ideas I’m sharing in this message came from a message by Pastor David Dykes in Texas.”*** This simple citation may prevent any criticism that may be directed toward you.

To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes