

As we begin today... I would like for you to recall a recent book or movie that held your interest all the way to the end. ... (You just **HAD** to keep going... to see how it would end.) Can you think of one...?

The author of *that* book... or the screen writer for *that* movie... employed a technique that is common to every story that holds our attention. As a writer... or story-teller... you **MUST** do this... if you want to keep your audience. (I try to teach my college public speaking students to do this when they develop their speeches... if they want to hold their audience's attention.)

You must raise a level of tension in every member of your audience. You need to create a level of discomfort in them (a feeling they don't like... and want to find relief from.) One of the most common tension tools – is curiosity. “*How will the hero get him/herself out of this jam?*” ...And just when the hero looks like they are about to solve the problem... the author incorporates a twist or turn in the course of events... so the tension is prolonged. If you resolve the tension too soon... the audience loses interest and leaves your story. Good writers keep the level of tension strong until the very last chapter... or scene in the movie.

In our passage of Scripture today in Luke's Gospel... Jesus (the Master story teller) packs a powerful punch by doing this very thing. He starts a story and quickly raises tension in us... as listeners... or readers. Then when everything looks like it has been resolved... BAM! We are hit with a dramatic twist... accompanied by the parable's most powerful lessons.

We only have time today for the first part of the story... which is one that most of you are familiar with... even by the title. ... (Now)... some Bible

scholars call it “The Parable of the Reversals”... because of all the twists... turns... and reversals that we see in it. But most of you know it by the title by which it is most often referred. The Prodigal... what (?) ... No. I know that is what most people call this parable... but the story is more about a loving Father... than it is about a wayward son. Years ago... I stopped referring to this parable as “*The Prodigal Son*”... in favor of “*The Parable of the Prodigal Father*.”

Depending on who you ask... the word “prodigal” can either mean “wasteful,” or it can mean “extremely generous or lavish.” This week I referred to two different theologians about the meaning of “prodigal.” One said that it meant “wasteful”... and the other said “extremely generous or lavish.” ... But do you know what? ... I think both meanings for this word “prodigal” are very fitting for the Father in this parable.

Many will feel some tension when the Father gives-in to the outlandish request of his younger son. “*Dad... you are being quite wasteful by your giving to your son all of his inheritance before you’re even dead... Why (in the world) would you do such a thing?*” ... This Father knew the character of his son. I’m sure that he knew that this audacious boy (which clearly announces itself by his asking for it – before his father’s death) would all be squander away – WHICH IS EXACTLY WHAT THE BOY DID!!!

This father looks to be extremely generous or lavish – even to the point of being wasteful. (So... get ready to feel some tension.) Then... near the end of the parable... the father will lavish extreme forgiveness on this son. This boy didn’t deserve it!!! ... THIS definitely is - a prodigal father.

But the parable could also be called “The Parable of the Prodigal **God**”... because it illustrates for us the lavishness of God’s love for you and I. God’s love is an incomprehensibly vast... bottomless... ocean. (And)... with the final twist... at the end of the parable... (which we will look at NEXT week... in part two.) you and I will be given a unique opportunity to measure our own spiritual temperature... (simply) by monitoring how we respond to God’s extravagant love shown to the two brothers. ... Please take note: Who do you most identify with – the younger... or the older brother? ... (And whose side will you take?) ... So let’s get started. Today we will see the YOUNGER BROTHER’s experience with the prodigal father.

Luke 15:11-12

The story begins with the younger son requesting to receive the assets that will eventually be his so he can go his own way. The boy is probably in his late teens, since he is still single. Interestingly, the reference to the estate is graphically called τὸν βίον (*ton bion*), which literally means “the life.” The son requests his portion of what his father’s life will leave him.

The son clearly looks to sever his relationship to his father and go away. By demanding his inheritance early... the younger son essentially divorced his father. From now on... there would be no relationship... no submitting to his authority... no responsibility to carry on the family legacy... and no communication. ... Put bluntly... he audaciously tells his father: “*I wish you were dead! You’re not... but let’s act as though you are...*” ... (Yeah... that’s enough kill any Father-Son Relationship.)

And if this doesn't seem selfish enough... stop and consider what else was inherent with this request. When my dad left an inheritance for his five children... there were a lot of things we had to sell... and liquidate... before it could be divided among us. We didn't sell his house... his car... or his stocks... or any of his belongings while he was still alive... because he was using them. ... But this father's son was asking him to sell off 1/3 of all his belongings. (Turn it into cash and give it to me now. I don't care if you still need it to live.)

(It certainly is not justifiable)... but he probably reasoned that he was only going to be young once—and that under the present arrangement he would be “ancient” (probably thirty at least!) before he would be able to enjoy his wealth. And as he followed that train of thought... he minimized present joys and freedoms. Everything at home was lousy—even the food!

Familiar story, isn't it? “Selfishness” “Me-me-me!” and “Rebellion” has been the theme of youth since the 1960's.

Self - sure had the priority here. He did not want the inheritance for some noble charity for others... or to start a worthy business. Instead... he wanted the inheritance so he could enjoy the unholy pleasures of the world.

It was a perversion of privilege. He looked at his UNEARNED privileges as debts that his father owed him... and as undeniable rights that he deserved.

(And) the younger son could not wait for the proper time to obtain his inheritance. Such is the way of the flesh. ... It has no patience. It wants fulfillment of fleshly pleasures now - not later! ... This type of person cannot wait for marriage to have sex... they do not want to wait at their

place of employment for wages... they do not want to wait and study for good grades in college. (Oh... please! Don't get me started...) ... The devil has many shortcuts... and they look appealing... but they are all deadly and will destroy. ... The problems of giving self top-priority nearly destroyed the younger son... as we will see later in our study.

Thomas Huxley said, "*A man's worst difficulties begin when he is able to do just as he likes.*" How true!

Because the boy showed so much disrespect and audacity... we should feel a level of tension rise within us. ... But how much more of this tension do you and I feel... when we read that the father actually granted the son's request...? He agreed! He gave the little brat what he asked for! ... "*Huh? ... Hold on! ... Dad... why would you do such a thing...? Are you totally out of your mind?*"

The father willingly transferred two-thirds of the estate to the older son... liquidated the remainder... and gave it to the younger son in the form of cash. ... The boy loaded up a cart with all his belongings and the lump of cash and put a long distance between himself and home... perhaps burning bridges all along the way.

This image pictures our Heavenly Father... letting the sinner go his own way. ... The father clearly illustrates God's love. His love allowed rebellion and in some sense respected human will. The father knew that the son made a foolish and greedy request... yet allowed him to go his course nonetheless.

(How's your level of tension doing?) ... Let me see if I can help. ... D.L. Moody used to share the following story:

Dr. Andrew Bonar told me how, in the Highlands of Scotland, a sheep would often wander off into the rocks and get into places that they couldn't get out of. The grass on these mountains is very sweet and the sheep like it, and they will jump down ten or twelve feet, and then they can't jump back again and the shepherd hears them bleating in distress. They may be there for days, until they have eaten all the grass. The shepherd will wait until they are so faint that they cannot stand, and then they will put a rope around him, and he will go over and pull that sheep up out of the jaws of death.

"Why don't they go down there when the sheep first gets there? I asked. "Ah!" he said, "they are so very foolish they would dash right over the precipice and be killed if they did." Moody concludes his story by saying: "And this is the way with men; they won't go back to God till they have no friends and have lost everything."

God knows that (often) the best way to rescue us – and bring us home – is only after we stop struggling and give up with the realization that we got ourselves into the mess. Sometimes we must hit absolute "rock-bottom" before we'll be ready to be rescued. ... If attempts are made of a forced rescue – we'll run even further into irretrievable danger. (But finally coming to our senses – while at rock bottom... is part of this parable.)

Luke 15:13-16

The hearers immediately would have begun to understand the point of the story. Jesus had been criticized for associating with sinners. The sinners were considered people who were far away from God... squandering their lives in riotous living. ... In contrast with the younger son... the older son continued to remain with the father and did not engage in such practices.

The Pharisees of Jesus' audience (I have no doubt) were nodding their heads. "Yes! *That boy deserved what he got!*" Jesus... the Master storyteller (no doubt) even had them identifying themselves as the older son who stayed home.

When you run away from your heavenly Father... the journey can end up being very far. The far country is not hard to find. In fact... you can enter it right where you are living. ... You do not have to go to a city known for its wickedness. ... You can even be a member of a good church... even teach a Bible Study... teach in Awana... or KIDS Church... and live in a "far country." ... There have been preachers who lived in the far country... but preached in pulpits every Sunday.

The far country is an attitude of a person's heart... mind... soul... will... and desires. ... People that live in a far country from the Father are living in rebellion and selfishness against the will of God and the Word of God. The distance into the far country is measured by the distance between a person and the Lord Jesus Christ.

When we look at this story... we find right away that prodigal sons or daughters can come from the best of families. There are no perfect parents or children. We know that Adam and Eve had the perfect Father in a perfect environment, but they chose to rebel against God. ... (Shockingly!) statistics tell us that 60 percent of teenagers who leave home were NOT physically... sexually... or mentally abused. They just took off. Husbands and wives can be in a solid marriage and one begins to wander.

Children have a will that you can try to mold for good... but you cannot control that will. They make their own choices... especially when they leave

the home. They are responsible for their choices and actions. They will reap what they have sown in their life.

The son's situation went from bad – to worse! His world collapsed on him. With no money... no family... and suffering in a distant land... the boy was in trouble. He had entered into poverty and had nowhere to turn.

Famine struck fear in the hearts of all ancient people. Historians record the bizarre depths to which starving people sink in order to survive... including their willingness to eat grass... shoe leather... garbage... and even the flesh of recently deceased neighbors.

Driven to survive by any means possible... the boy hired himself out and took a job feeding swine — a role most Gentiles would not have wanted... to say nothing of a Hebrew. As a Jew... he could have stooped no lower.

Swineherding paid next to nothing... and he found himself envying the pigs' diet of carob pods. These were hard... bean-like seeds encased in leathery pods... barely edible for humans and not even the first choice for livestock.

Any person who wanders away from God the Father will experience a spiritual famine in his/her life. If you run away from the Lord (our heavenly Father)... don't be surprised when you wake up someday and wonder: "*Why am I not happy? ... Why don't I have any joy? ... Why don't I get my prayers answered? ... Why am I so cranky? ... Why am I so bitter and angry? ... Why do I have constant turmoil and trouble all the time?*" ... The answer may be the fact that you are suffering from spiritual famine and the Lord is trying to bring you back to Himself.

So let's stop here for a second. If you are jealous or envious of sinful... carnal people... if you are longing for slop - like drugs... drunken brawls...

immorality... or pornography - you (my friend) are well on your way to a far country where you will experience the same kind of despair and famine.

You are on a path that you don't want to be on for sure. You may be living high on the hog now... but you are headed to living with the hogs like the younger son. The slop that this world tries to serve to us will not satisfy us for very long at all.

When a Christian starts to long for and crave the filth of this world... you mark it down... he is heading for pig-living and wallowing in the world's pig sty. Stay away from that stuff!

Running away from our Heavenly Father leaves us with the desire to fill the shouting... screaming emptiness of life with anything we can. (And) It can be good things... such as housework... yard-work... church-work... or busywork. It can also be bad things. The emptiness must be filled at any cost. Since we are un-repentant... we continue to go deeper into a spiritual sloth.

He reaped what he had sown. He sowed selfishness and now he was reaping it. He sowed unconcern for his father and now he reaps it from all the others in that far away place. He didn't care about his family... and he reaps unconcern and apathy from those who he had surrounded himself with. You reap what you sow.

This scene in the drama is our Lord's way of emphasizing what sin really does in the lives of those who reject the Father's will. Sin promises freedom... but it only brings slavery... It promises success... but brings failure... It promises life... but "the wages of sin is death." The boy thought

he would “find himself” - but he only lost himself! ... When God is left out of our lives... enjoyment becomes enslavement.

Luke 15:17-19

Remorse for his rebellion didn't move the boy. Regret for his dissipation didn't rattle his conscience. The humiliation of tending swine didn't trigger his Jewish scruples. ... But the realization that pigs enjoyed a superior lifestyle to his own sparked a moment of clarity. The opening of Luke 15:17 reads (literally) “*He came to himself*”... which is to say that his reason returned.

C. S. Lewis wrote, “[Pain] plants the flag of truth within the fortress of a rebel soul.” ... **[P A U S E]** ...

He came to himself. Sin does an awful thing for us. It makes us see the world incorrectly. It makes us see ourselves in the wrong light. It makes us see the pleasures of this world in the wrong perspective... and we just don't see clearly when we're in sin.

He arrived at the conclusion that his decision to leave home was what? ...Simply unwise? ...A practical error? ... No - definitely a *sin*... nothing less. ... A sin committed against whom? ...Against his father? ... Well... first and most of all against “heaven” - that is “against God” (Hebrews often substituted the word *heaven* for God). ... It was God who had given him a wonderful... kind... and loving father. So his sin **was** “against heaven” (or against God.)

The son developed a plan of action. The son acted **quickly** and humbly.

The story is told about two frogs that sat on the edge of the water. One decided to jump. How many did that leave on the edge? If somebody says... “One”... the correct reply is... “It leaves two. I did not say one jumped; I only said he **decided** to jump.” ... See... there is a big difference in deciding to do something and actually doing it. The decision to do something is **vain** - unless it leads to **action**.

In this story... the prodigal son put action to his decision and returned home to his father. He escaped the pig pen. When he made up his mind to return... he departed immediately with urgency. If you want to escape from the pig pen... then take immediate steps once you make up your mind to get out. Delaying your decision will make matters more difficult to put feet to your decision. When you delay... there is a tendency to lose the seriousness of your situation or to make excuses for your faults.

If you are under conviction about something in your life... then act on the conviction and get the matter right now. If you need to trust Christ as your Savior... then do it today. Paul said: *“Now is the accepted time... now is the day of salvation.”* ... **[P A U S E]** ...

The confession pictures his repentance... coming to the father bearing nothing but his need. He plans to turn and come home... openly confessing his failure.

The son even decides what he will tell his father. He will place himself at his father’s discretion... assert no rights... and recognize that he has no claims. ... He is unworthy of being received as a family member. He accepts the consequences of his choices. There are no excuses... only

confession and a humble request. **The picture shows what repentance looks like: no claims... just reliance on God's mercy and provision.**

Take note of the humility in his rehearsed speech. He acknowledged his affront without minimizing or justifying or shifting blame. He didn't say, "*I made a mistake.*" He took responsibility for making a wrong moral decision... one that estranged him from his father and his God.

He also acknowledged the consequences of his decision. His admission, "*I am no longer worthy to be called your son*"... wasn't a platitude. It was a fact. He had legally forfeited his status as the man's son. He left his lofty expectations in the pigsty with his sin. Instead of asking to be restored as a son... he offered to become a hired hand.

The boy's speech demonstrated maturity... responsibility... humility... and compassion for those he harmed. He truly "returned to his senses." ... Little can he anticipate the response that awaits him. ... The father spots him while he is still far way and reacts immediately with compassion and acceptance. As the one who initiates... the father now becomes the center of the story.

You (probably) know this parable very well. We read in the next verses that the father had been waiting and watching for his son to return home. ... And when he saw him at a distance... he ran and said to his servant: "*Go down to the tree and cut me about a half a dozen hickory limbs. I'm going to switch this boy within an inch of his life.*"

Is that the way your Bible reads? ...Well... mine doesn't either. It ought to read that way. Under the Mosaic Law a father had a perfect right to bring a disobedient son before the elders and have him stoned to death. This

father had a perfect right to say, *“This boy took my name and my money, my substance, and he squandered it. He disgraced my name. I’ll whip him within an inch of his life.”* He had a right to do this.

But this father... rather... did something amazing. And when our Lord got to this part of the parable... it must have caused all His listeners to blink their eyes. They probably said to themselves:

“We can’t believe that. It’s bad enough to see a Jewish boy hit the bottom and go live with the pigs, but it’s worse for the father to take him back home without doing something. He ought to punish him. That’s the thing that we don’t like. He ought to be punished.”

So notice (now) what the father did do. Let me read it accurately now.

Luke 15:20-24

Surely the son must have wondered how his father would respond to his return home and confession. He does not have to wonder long: the father runs to him and gives him a giant hug... breaking all protocol.

I believe this father was looking for his son’s return. He stayed alert for his arrival. If you have run away from the Lord... He is looking for your return... too. He desires that you come back to Him. He does not force Himself upon us... but gives us opportunities to return to Him again and again.

What does the father in our parable do? ... Each of his four actions deserves comment: he sympathizes deeply... he runs... he embraces... and he kisses. - And all this before the son has even said a word! ... Such marvelous love!

FIRST of all - He sympathizes. I can think of no better rendering than “his heart went out to him.” As the distance between father and son diminishes,

the former sees more and more clearly how tired and wretched his son is looking. He pities him. He interprets the return of “his boy” in the most favorable sense: the lad has repented. He is sorry for what he has done. How intensely this father loves his son. Shall we say, “Now, more than ever”?

SECOND -. He runs. This father threw aside his own dignity and ran to meet his returning son - something *no* Near Eastern father would have done. ... A Jewish man wore long robes and running was a humiliating... undignified... and an unacceptable thing to do - especially when he was greeting someone. ... A Jewish man would signify his own importance by waiting... or at most... **walking** to receive someone. The father did not care what others thought. His boy was home!

THIRD - He throws his arms around his son’s neck. As if hiking up his robes and running to meet the unworthy son didn’t already obliterate the man’s dignity... he “fell on his neck.” ... Passionately he embraced his son. Does not this very fact indicate that the father has already in his heart granted forgiveness to his son?

FOURTH - He kisses him again and again... tenderly... fervently.

No matter what some preachers (and singers) claim... we are not saved by God’s **love**. God loves the whole world... and the whole world is not saved. We are saved by God’s **grace**... and grace is **love that pays a price**.

Everything the younger son had hoped to find in the far country... he discovered back home: clothes... jewelry... friends... joyful celebration... love... and assurance for the future. - What made the difference?

(I'm so glad that you asked! Now LISTEN! ... Get this...) ... Instead of saying: "Father, *give* me!" he said, "Father, *make* me!" ... [P A U S E] ... Instead of saying: "Father, *give* me!" he said, "Father, *make* me!"

He was willing to be a servant! ... Of course... the father did not ask him to "earn" his forgiveness... because this pictures that no amount of good works can save us from our sins (Eph. 2:8–10 and Titus 3:3–7 make that perfectly clear). In the far country... the prodigal learned the meaning of *misery*... but back home... he discovered the meaning of *mercy*.

Here we must see that the real prodigal is the father... representing our heavenly Father - *God* Himself! ... This is the Parable of the Prodigal God - Who is infinite. He is a consuming fire! ... But when we turn to Him... He is a God Who comes running — to lavish His love upon us! ... *This* is the gospel — the good news of a prodigal God Who rushes to meet sinners with His love!

No one is beyond His love. You cannot do anything that will keep Him from kissing you and bestowing upon you the robe... the ring... and the sandals. Utter forgiveness is the only kind God gives.

(Now)... There are only two qualifications for this forgiveness. First... we must see *ourselves* before we can see *God*. ... We must recognize that we are wayward sons... if we are to see His love. ... If we know what we are... we can know His love. ... We must see ourselves in the lost son... and then we must come home.

Ernest Hemingway wrote a story about a father and his teenage son. In the story... the relationship had become somewhat strained... and the teenage

son ran away from home. His father began a journey in search of that rebellious son.

Finally... in Madrid, Spain... in a last desperate attempt to find the boy... the father put an ad in the local newspaper. The ad read: "*Dear Paco, Meet me in front of the newspaper office at noon. All is forgiven. I love you. Your father.*"

The next day... in front of the newspaper office... eight hundred Pacos showed up. They were all seeking forgiveness. They were all seeking the love of their father.

The young son in today's parable wanted forgiveness... like all these boys named Paco. ... This son did not waste any time in seeking his father's forgiveness and making matters right with his dad. This is important when you are trying to escape from the pig pen.

Are you in a far-away place? Have you journeyed away from God...? Maybe not to a physical far away land. Perhaps you are caught-up in some sin... like pornography... or unforgiveness... bitterness... or any form of selfishness.

Come home, Paco! Your Father is waiting...