

*Mondovi: Our Savior's & Gilmanton United Methodist Churches
3.30.2025, Fourth Sunday in Lent, Rev. Hyuntae Kim, Ph.D.*

The Return of the Prodigal Son

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32.

Let us pray: Father, we thank You for allowing us to dwell in Your house. Today, lead us deeper into Your Word, that we may experience the unexpected mercy and loving embrace of the Father. We pray in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, who always guides us back to You. Amen.

It seems difficult for us to fully understand the love of our parents. When we reflect on all they have done for us, we realize that, as human beings, they were not always perfect. Yet, a parent's love for their child is undoubtedly greater than a child's love for their parents. If we struggle to grasp the depth of human love, how much more challenging is it to comprehend the love of the unseen God? That is why God has given us the Scriptures, so that throughout our lives, we may continually discover His love through His Word. Today, I hope that through the parable in Luke 15, we may experience God's love more deeply.

Looking at the context in which Jesus told this parable, we see that "all the tax collectors and sinners were drawing near to hear him" (Luke 15:1). It is only when we listen to this message as tax collectors and sinners that we can truly understand it. The Pharisees and scribes were also present, muttering against Jesus because He associated with tax collectors, sinners, and prostitutes, even sharing meals with them. They grumbled because Jesus acted outside the legalistic framework they upheld.

In truth, there is a Pharisee and scribe within us as well—when Jesus acts beyond the boundaries we have set in our minds, we, too, may be quick to criticize Him. The Pharisees and scribes did not see themselves as the prodigal son. Instead, they saw Jesus as the prodigal—one who had strayed from God's law and Israel's traditions.

This parable carries multiple layers of meaning. On one level, the prodigal son represents us. Yet, on another level, it points to Jesus Christ, who left with everything of the Father to come to this world, spending it all, living a life akin to a servant feeding pigs, becoming our friend, and sacrificing Himself like the fatted calf. Therefore, this parable contains the story of how the Lord saves us. In fact, there are two lost sons in this story. The elder son, though he remained at home, was also a prodigal in his own way—just like the murmuring Pharisees and scribes. Today, due to time constraints, we will focus on the younger son.

A man had two sons, and the younger son said to his father, "Father, give me my share of the estate." So he took his property and left. The word "estate" here carries the meaning of "essence" or "substance." Who was the first person in Scripture to receive a portion of God's essence? It was Adam. The first Adam, created in the image of God, received His essence but squandered it in this world and ultimately lost it. Likewise, we, too, are beings who have lost this essence.

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However, Jesus, who is fully filled with God's essence, came and united Himself with us so that we might have this essence restored.

After the younger son had wasted all his inheritance, he went and attached himself to a citizen of that country, who sent him into the fields to feed pigs. In truth, this "certain man" represents the Lord Jesus Christ in a veiled way—He is the one who provides for us, even when we do not yet know Him. Before we came to faith in Christ, we were like pigs, yet God still reigned over this world as its sovereign, like the owner of a pig farm, sustaining us even in our lost state. However, we must recognize that what He provided in that condition was not honey but carob pods meant for pigs. The true sustenance we need is found only in Jesus Christ. He is our true food, and anything apart from Him is nothing more than husks.

The prodigal son, in his hunger, said to himself, "How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!" Then, he resolved to return. Though it seems as if he turned back of his own accord, this too was the work of the Holy Spirit. If his circumstances had not become so dire, he would not have realized his need to return.

Before this parable, we see the parable of the woman who searches for the lost coin. It tells us that if a woman loses one of her ten coins, she lights a lamp, sweeps the house, and diligently searches for it. In reality, all the parables in Luke 15 are interconnected. This "certain woman" represents the Holy Spirit, and lighting the lamp signifies the illumination of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who shines light into the prodigal son's heart, allowing him to realize his condition. Sweeping with a broom symbolizes how the Spirit disrupts the prodigal's circumstances—bringing a great famine upon that country and driving him into desperation.

When we face hardships, we must ask ourselves whether they are the Spirit's broom at work, and we should pray to discern where we need to turn back. The missing coin was lost inside the house. Likewise, even within God's house—the church—our bodies may be present, yet our hearts may be like that of a prodigal who has wandered far away.

Through the sweeping and illumination of the Holy Spirit, the younger son comes to realize, "*I have sinned against heaven and before my father.*" Sinning against heaven refers to the sins of unbelief and pride—the belief that he could live well on his own without his father. Sinning against his father refers to the loss of relationship, belonging, and all that he had received from his father. In matters of inheritance, the relationship with the father was crucial. According to tradition, when a father distributed his wealth, the elder son received two-thirds, and the younger son one-third. After the father's passing, the inheritance would fully belong to them, but while the father was still alive, it remained a shared possession between the father and his sons. The

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younger son, however, disregarded this shared ownership and spent everything as if it belonged solely to him—committing a grave offense.

What about our Heavenly Father? He is eternal and does not die. Therefore, He desires to share all that He has with us. Jesus, as the firstborn, receives two-thirds, while we, as the younger son, receive one-third. But beyond this, because we are united with Christ, we become joint heirs of 100% of the inheritance. This is what the father meant when he said to the elder son, *"All that is mine is yours."* Romans 8:17 affirms this truth: *"If we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ."* Faith is realizing that though we were once lost, we have been transferred into a position in Christ Jesus, where we receive all the riches of God. May you take hold of this by faith.

The prodigal son, feeling unworthy to be treated as his father's son, resolves to ask his father to hire him as a servant. A servant in this sense refers to a day laborer, not a full-time worker. While his repentance is significant, he still does not fully grasp his father's love, and even in his repentance, there remains a sense of self-righteousness. However, what is remarkable is that when he finally returns, he is unable to utter those words. The father's love causes him to abandon even his self-righteousness.

We are not saved by our repentance. Repentance is our turning back to the Lord, but His forgiveness does not come simply because we return. If God were to forgive us without atonement, He would be unjust, for sin must be paid for. We are forgiven because the Lord bore the cost of our sin by dying in our place. If the father had simply forgiven the prodigal son upon his return without payment for his wrongdoing, he would have been unjust. Someone had to die for the son's sin—who was it? The fatted calf. Even if we were to repent for a lifetime, our repentance would still be insufficient. We are saved because the Lord Jesus became our sin offering, our peace offering, and our burnt offering.

When the father sees his son returning, he is "filled with compassion" (Luke 15:20). This phrase means a deep, gut-wrenching sorrow and mercy. This is the very nature of God's mercy. It is not a detached pity or mere sympathy. The father runs to his son, embraces him, and kisses him. Just as the father embraced his son, so too has God embraced us. In Christ Jesus, we have been united with Him. The act of kissing signifies aligning ourselves with His word. It represents the process by which we grow in learning His word.

When the son returns, he receives an extravagant set of gifts. The first is the father's embrace—his father's arms. This represents the arm of the Lord revealed to us, which is Christ incarnate. We have received Christ.

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Next, the father gives him a robe. A robe signifies a new identity. Galatians 3 declares that we have been clothed with Christ. This robe *is* Christ—it is the robe of the Son of God and the robe of true humanity. The son is no longer a mere wretched being like a pig. He has now become a brother of Christ, a true man, and part of the new Adam.

The next gift is the ring, which represents authority. Then comes the shoes. In Scripture, shoes signify position. Slaves were not allowed to wear shoes, so wearing them signifies sonship. Shoes also symbolize the gospel in motion—Ephesians 6 speaks of the shoes of the gospel of peace, worn by the soldiers of God.

The next gift is the fatted calf. We partake of Christ, who is the sacrificial calf. He is not only the atoning sacrifice that pays for our sins but also the feast that brings reconciliation. Furthermore, the father provides the calf as nourishment to restore the prodigal son, who had grown weak from eating only pods and traveling a long distance. Likewise, for our souls to be strengthened, Christ must be within us as our nourishment. The incarnate Christ is the One we believe in, but the Christ who now comes to us by the Spirit is the One we must eat and drink—just as we breathe in air.

Christ Jesus, the Holy Prodigal, became like us, prodigals tending pigs. Even before we knew Him, He was already at work in our lives through the Holy Spirit. He restored our lost relationship with the Father and regained for us our lost essence—the inheritance of the Father's heavenly kingdom—by dying as the sacrificial calf.

May you experience the fullness and reality of Christ in this Word today, receiving the Father's kiss in His embrace, and may you rejoice in the abundance of the Father. Amen.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, the Holy Prodigal, who came to gift the Father's abundance and essence to us, the prodigal sons, we thank You for revealing the Father to us through Your work, allowing us to reunite and be united with Him. If there are areas in our relationship with the Father where we need to turn back, help us through the sweeping and illumination of the Holy Spirit. We receive with faith and rejoice in the gifts of the Father given through You—the robe of righteousness, the ring of authority, the shoes of sonship and the prepared gospel, and Christ, the sacrificial calf of reconciliation. We pray through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.