

Measuring Your Worth In God's Eyes

Luke 15:11-31

One of the very first songs I ever learned to play on the guitar was a John Denver tune called, "Prodigal Son." Do some of you remember that?

I wasn't a Christian at the time, but I was vaguely aware that John Denver got the title from a story in the Bible. So, even though I had no clue what the word "Prodigal" meant, it didn't really bother me, because my perception at the time was that the Bible was such an old book that you couldn't really understand anything in it anyway.

Later, when I did become a Christian and came across the story in the NT, I remember thinking, "Oh yeah! so this is the prodigal son story," and wondering briefly what the word meant, and then after reading the story, I figured that a prodigal must be some sort of wanderer, because after all, the prodigal son in this story wandered off, didn't he?

So it wasn't until years later... in fact this year... in fact, this week, that I actually got out a dictionary and looked up the word prodigal.

Anybody want to know what I found?

According to the American Heritage Dictionary, "**Prodigal**" = **recklessly wasteful, extravagant...**

So the story of the "prodigal son" is the story of a son who was recklessly wasteful. Having convinced his father to give him his inheritance early, he squandered it all on fast living before coming home.

Only I don't think that's what this story is about at all. I don't think this is a story about a son. I think the story is actually about *the father*.

Notice how it begins: ***There was a man who had two sons.*** – ***Luke 15:11***

Who's the subject of that sentence? The man. His sons are the *object*.

This is the story of the Prodigal Father. It's about a father who is extravagant, recklessly wasteful with his love for his children. And to fully appreciate it, you really ought to see it in its entirety. So throughout this message I'm going to put various verses on the wall, but you will get much more out of it if you open up a Bible and follow along as we go through this.

What's really neat is, if you study this story carefully, you'll discover that it can tell you more about God than you've ever dreamed. In my mind, this story is one of the most important stories in the entire Bible, because it's the story of what the Heavenly Father is like.

If you want to know how God feels about you, if you want to know how much you are worth in God's eyes, if you've ever wondered if you have any significance in this vast universe, then this is the story for you.

This story answers the question, "How does God feel about you?" Can I tell you about it?

The story is a story Jesus tells. We learned last week that it's the third story in a triumvirate of stories He tells it in response to some muttering the Pharisees were doing when they saw him hanging out with the riffraff of Israel.

The Pharisees didn't like it that He, a fellow Rabbi, was dragging down the reputation of all Rabbis by associating with the outcasts of society.

This muttering and whispering did not sit well with Jesus. So He turns to them and tells them about a shepherd who had a hundred sheep and lost one, and a woman who had ten coins, and lost one, and a father who had two sons, and lost one. – That's what we covered last week.

Friends, for years I read this story thinking the son was the center of the action. My whole view of God was elevated when I finally saw that the father, not the son, was the star.

The story of the prodigal father is a story told in five scenes. Scene 1 is set on the family homestead. And it's about **A. *The Father dividing His property*** between his two sons.

Scene 2 covers what happens to the **B. *Younger Son in the far-away land*** he runs to to escape the scorn of the village.

Scene 3 describes the interaction between the father and the younger son when **C. *The Younger Son returns***

Scene 4 picks up with **D. *The Older Son in the field***.

And scene 5 is about how **E. *The Older Son... returns?*** – Or does he. To understand that, you have to understand a whole bunch of rich first century Jewish culture.

And to take it all down, I've given you about an inch of space under each scene, so write small, because there is a lot here, okay?

But this is such an amazing story that I want you to see it in full digital video, with Dolby surround sound. So, for the next 15 minutes, I want to pretend that you know almost nothing about first century Jewish culture and fill in the whole picture, scene by scene.

In scene 1, [**A. *The Father dividing His property***] the younger son asks the father to divide his property between his sons so the younger can have his inheritance now.

And he does.

At first glance, you might think that this is just a really cool dad, or a dad without many boundaries who was just putty in his children's hands. – You might be right on both counts, but you'd miss the point of what really happens in this scene because what Jesus was actually describing here would be scandalous to every person who heard it. – No one in the Middle East would make such a request of their father. Because to ask for their inheritance early would be tantamount to expressing a death wish for the father.

Author Ken Bailey, who lived in that region of the world for quite some time wrote this, ***For over fifteen years I have been asking people of all walks of life from Morocco to India and from Turkey to the Sudan about the implications of a son's request for his inheritance while the father is still living. The answer has almost always been emphatically the same.***

...the conversation runs as follows:

"Has anyone ever made such a request in your village?"

"Never!"

"Could anyone ever make such a request?"

"Impossible!"

"If anyone did, what would happen?"

"His father would beat him, of course!"

"Why?"

"This request means – he wants his father to die!"

One Middle Eastern writer, Ibrahim Sa'id writes, ***The shepherd in his search for the sheep, and the woman in her search for the coin do not do anything out of the ordinary beyond what anyone in their place would do. But the actions the father takes in the third story are unique, marvelous, divine actions which have not been done by any father in the past.***

"Divide your inheritance, so that I can have my share of the estate," is the request. And to everyone's amazement, the father does!

The next words of the story go like this, ***Not long after that, the younger son got together all that he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth on wild living. – Luke 15:13***

Most Westerners think he took off so quickly because he was just a party animal, plan and simple, and being in the same town with his conservative old man just cramped his style.

But that's not his motivation for leaving at all. Notice that he didn't leave immediately. He left "not long after that."

Why? Because he had to liquidate his inheritance. He had to find a buyer for his portion of the family farm, his portion of the family jewels, his portion of the family livestock. And the only people he could sell to were other people in the village.

So, as Jesus is telling this story, his listeners were imagining this brash young man, going from door to door, trying to convince people who knew his father to buy a piece of the family property. – *When all those folks knew that this boy had insulted his father, shamed him, wished him dead.* And now he was doing the unthinkable – selling off property and possessions that had been in the family for generations.

"At every turn, he's greeted with amazement, horror, and rejection. – The family's estate is a significant part of a Middle Easterner's personal identity."

As the scorn mounts, he feels more and more pressure to get out of town.

So he leaves as soon as he has sold the last of his goods. By now, the villagers are openly antagonistic towards him. There's been talk about shunning him, or publicly shaming him – taking some action to put this young, insolent upstart in his place.

So as soon as all the negotiations are done and the transactions completed, the son leaves town and heads for ***B. The far-away country.*** Which is where scene two takes place.

In the far-away country, this wayward son gradually descends into his own personal hell.

The text says, ***He squandered his wealth in wild living.*** – ***Luke 15:13.*** He wasted it. And the citizens of this far-away country know that.

They, too, are unimpressed with this frivolous young man who is now out of money.

The polite way a Middle Easterner gets rid of unwanted "hangers-on" isn't to come right out and tell them to go home. It's to assign them a task they'll refuse.

So, when the son asks for a job, one of the citizens offers to let him become his pig-herder. It's a job no self-respecting Jewish boy could accept. Pigs were unclean animals according to the Law of Moses. And they had to be fed seven days a week, which meant he couldn't keep the Sabbath.

To everyone's surprise, he accepts the job. But it's a terrible job, and doesn't pay well enough to stave off hunger.

In this hole of self-pity, he begins to think honestly about himself. He knows there is no life for him in this foreign land, yet he can't go home to his father, because he's a failure. He has nothing to offer his father. Middle Eastern sons are supposed to provide for their fathers in their old age, not live off of them.

But now he begins to think creatively. He realizes that he can't go back home and ask to live in the family house as a son. But maybe he could go home and ask for a job as a hired servant. That way, if he works hard and saves as much as he can, some day maybe he will be able to earn enough to be of some use to his father.

So he comes up with a plan: he'll go home, admit he was a fool, and instead of asking to be reinstated as a son, he'll ask to be hired as a servant!

The plan has merit, except for one thing: even if his father accepts him on these terms, he'll have to face the scorn and wrath of the villagers.

All of you who have moved here from a foreign country know that it is always difficult to return home unless you have succeeded. This guy has not only not succeeded, he's a miserable failure.

But his real problem is, how did the villagers feel about him when he left? They hated him. He had disgraced them all by wishing that his father was dead and then again by disposing of the family's property. Add to that that he lost all his money to despised gentiles, and the prodigal has no solution for what he's going to do with the villagers when he gets home. He will simply have to endure the mocking and scorn and shaming they will give him as he walks through the town on the way to his father's house.

That's scene two.

In scene 3, ***C. The Younger Son Returns.***

This is where the father comes into the story in full force.

The father, because of his experience, knows two things. 1. He knows that the son, because of his maturity level and the character with which he left home, is bound to fail. He knows that, if the son ever does come home, it will probably not be as a successful businessman, but more likely as a beggar.

The second thing the father knows is that the village will not treat him well. Since his departure, all the townspeople have told him openly and repeatedly that he should not have granted the inheritance in the first place, that this son is a rascal and deserves nothing short of death.

He knows that, if the son ever does return, that the first person who sees him will quickly pass the word that this pariah has come home and that a crowd will gather and likely begin to mock him and spit on him, if not hurt him outright. He knows that the son, in order to get home, will have to endure the scorn of the crowd with every step he takes through the village.

The father knows this. The father knows this.

And what he does in scene 3 to counteract all this is nothing short of amazing.

In scene 3, the father does five things that would all be considered outrageous in Middle Eastern society. They're all designed to protect and restore this son that he loves so much. This son who has turned away from him and rejected him and wished him dead.

The first thing the father does is, *he runs*.

When word comes to him that his son has been seen on the outskirts of the village, the father runs to him. Can you see why this is so significant? Instead of letting his son run the gauntlet, the father runs the gauntlet for him.

It's an outrageous thing he does, because an Oriental nobleman with flowing robes never runs anywhere. He lifts his robe, exposing his ankles, and runs down the road, through the village, in front of all the villages. He humiliates himself.

One ancient Jewish writer writes this about running. He says,
A man's manner of walking tells you what he is. – Ben Sirach

A modern scholar writes this:
It is so very undignified in Eastern eyes for an elderly man to run. – Leslie Weatherhead

Aristotle, the famous Greek philosopher said, ***Great men never run in public. – Aristotle***

But the father does. And Jesus explains why. He says, ***But while he was still a long ways off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him... - Luke 15:20***

He was filled with compassion for him. That's how the father feels about his children. He has compassion on us.

The father deliberately runs through the village, He knows he's creating a spectacle. He knows what he's doing will attract a crowd. He knows they will take about his humiliation in the village for the rest of his life.

Imagine this for just a minute from the son's perspective.

He knows his father lives in the middle of town and that the town hates him. He knows there is no way he can get to the father without enduring scorn. But he has to get to the father in order to become his servant. So he sets his jaw and he walks the last few miles towards the town. And sure enough, at first sighting on the outskirts of the village, word starts spreading. People are going to gather. He's about to endure the worst moments of his life.

As he comes to the edge of the village, he expects to see rocks and jeers and angry faces. Instead, what he sees coming towards him are the ankles of his father. To his utter amazement, rather than experiencing the ruthless hostility he deserves for what he's done, he finds a visible demonstration of the love of his father. – Words can't express what this scene conveys, friends. You can only imagine it in your mind.

The father runs.

The second thing the father does is, he kisses his son.

The text says, ***...he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. – Luke 15:20***

Can you picture it?

They're embracing, eye to eye, shoulder to shoulder.

In his mind, the son had pictured himself coming home and abasing himself. First he'd kiss his father's hand, then he'd kiss his father's feet. But the father won't let him. He puts his arms around him and kisses him on both cheeks.

The son can't bend, he can't stoop. All he can do is accept this love.

The Greek word used here to describe what the father does is kataphilew. Literally it means, "to kiss again and again."

Picture yourself in this scene, friends. You have wronged God, and you know it. You know you're going to need to grovel and admit wrong and make all sorts of promises and really mean it.

So you approach Him. And you've got your whole speech planned. Only He doesn't even let you begin. The minute you approach Him, He embraces you. – It's a powerful picture, isn't it?

Now, let's back up and see for a minute what the son had planned to do when he first saw his father. In scene 2, he planned out his whole speech. He says, ***"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 our hired men."*** – Luke 15:19

See his plan? Admit his guilt and ask to become a servant in his father's household.

Now, look at the actual speech when it comes out in scene 3: ***The son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be your son." – Luke 15:21***

What's missing from the speech?

His request to become a servant.

Why is it missing?

Because he's overwhelmed by the father's love.

His plan was to earn his way back into his father's favor. He never intended to ask his father to accept him back just as he was. How could he do that?

But when the father runs and kisses him, how could he not accept the father's love for a son?

The third thing the father does is call for a robe to be put on his son. Imagine this. Here are his exact words: ***But the father said to his servants, "Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him." – Luke 15:22***

Question: who owned the best robe in the family?

The father.

The father and son are still standing on the edge of the village, and the father wants the whole village to know that he has accepted his son. So he sends his servants to get his own best robe so the son can wear it as he walks home through the village.

Amazing, isn't it?

The fourth thing the father does is call for a ring. ***Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. – Luke 15:22***

The ring is probably a signet ring. It's the ring the father would use to sign all documents, which means the son is a trusted, empowered member of the family. The sandals are a sign the he is a free man, not a servant. Servants didn't get shoes. They walked barefoot.

Finally, the father says, ***"Bring the fatted calf and kill it." – Luke 15:23***

Not the fatted goat or sheep or chicken. The fatted calf. Why a calf?

Because a calf had enough meat on it to feed the whole village.

Do you see what the father is doing?

He's inviting the whole village to share his joy. He doesn't want the son only to be reconciled to him, he wants him to be reconciled to the whole village. He wants everyone to have a relationship with his son.

Wow! Wow!

This is a story that no one could have anticipated.

One commentator writes, *For Palestinian listeners, initially the father would naturally be a symbol of God. Then, as the story progresses, the father comes down out of the house and, in a dramatic act, demonstrates unexpected love publicly in humiliation.*

It is a rags-to-unbelievable-riches story. Only the riches aren't about money, they're about measuring your worth in God's eyes.

Do you see what Jesus is doing with this story? He is communicating to every person who ever wanted to take a step towards God, how significant we are to Him. How God feels about us. He doesn't just wait for us, He runs to us. He doesn't let us bear the shame of living our lives as if we wished He were dead. He bears it for us. He kisses us. He puts His robe on us, His ring on our finger, His sandals on our feet, He kills the fatted calf to celebrate us and invite everyone else to celebrate us with Him.

I wish I had time to unpack all the cool stuff about the way He treats the older brother as well, but I don't. So I just want to dip into it so you can see what's there. And I want to give you what you might consider some "upper divisional Bible teaching" so you can appreciate this story just a little bit more.

Scene 4 is about the older son. The older son hasn't left home, but if you read the story carefully, you'll discover that he too has left his father. As the scene opens, where is the older son? He's out working in the field. [***D. The older son in the field.***]

Now, there are two mentions of the older son in the opening of the story. As Jesus begins the story He says, ***"There was a man who had two sons. The younger said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them."*** – Luke 15:11

In the first sentence, he's mentioned as one of the two sons, in the second, he's mentioned as having received his share of the estate. "He divided his property between them."

So the older son owns everything that he and his father now live on. It belongs to him.

As the older son is coming in from the fields, he hears music and gets the report from one of the servants that his brother has returned home safely and that a party is going on.

What's the older brother's response to this? He becomes angry.

He refuses to join the party. (Which would be a severe insult to his father, and humiliate him a second time in front of the whole village, because the older son's role at a party was to welcome all the guests. With him not at the party, everybody knows that he has rejected his father.)

If you read farther, you find that, in his heart, the older son has distanced himself as much from his father as the younger son.

He says to 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.” – Luke 15:29***

Those two statements type us off to the older son's distance from his father. First of all, does he think of himself as a son? No, he's been slaving for the father. He hasn't lived with him like a son, but like a servant. – The very thing the younger son had decided was the best he could do after he had shamed his father.

Second thing, he's mad because the father had never given him an animal to throw a party with his friends. Notice that, in his mind, his friends are not the father's friends. He doesn't want to party with his dad or be friends with his friends. He's developed his own relational web, and the father has nothing to do with it.

The truly sad and amazing thing, though, about this son, is that he felt deprived by the father because the father had never given him anything – no calf, no chicken, not even a goat.

But what happened when the younger son left? The older son got his share of the inheritance too.

So the father says, ***My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.” – Luke 15:31***

“I already gave it to you! All these years it's been yours.”

So the older son has distanced himself. And he refuses to join his father at the party. So what does the father do? The same thing he did for his younger son – he humiliates himself by leaving the party and going out to his older son.

Now here's where it gets interesting. And here's where the upper divisional Bible part comes in.

Are you ready for this?

Jesus, like all good Jewish storytellers of His day, tells this story in a chiastic way. – Bear with me for a minute, and I’ll explain this.

All stories from this region, and almost all stories from the Bible, are told with a certain structure to them called, “Chiasm.”

“Chi” is the Greek letter that looks like this: (X).

If you read most Bible stories carefully, you’ll find that you could diagram them to look like this.

Scene 1 =

The younger son -

- A. A son is lost
- B. Goods wasted in wild living
- C. Everything lost
- D. The Great Sin (feeding pigs for gentiles)
- E. Total rejection
- F. Change of mind
- F¹ Initial repentance
- E¹ Total acceptance
- D¹ The Great Repentance (“I am unworthy”)
- C¹ Everything gained
- B¹ Goods wasted in wild partying
- A¹ A son is found

See the symmetry?

This structure looks like the front half of an X, or “chi,” so smart guys call this a chiasm.

Pretty cool, isn’t it? If you want to have some fun this afternoon, look around at other Bible stories and you’ll probably find this same pattern.

This is the structure of the story of the younger son.

This is the structure of the story of the older son.

Now look at Scene 2:

Scene 2 =

The older son -

- A. A son is far-off
- B. Your brother safe/a feast
- C. Father comes to reconcile

D. "How you treated me"
 D¹ "How you treated him"
 C¹ Father tries to reconcile
 B¹ Your brother safe/a feast
 A¹ A son is _____?

See what's missing?

The conclusion – A Prime (A¹).

I want to suggest to you that Jesus is doing something very deliberate with this story, that would have been intuitively understood by all his listeners, because all of them would have used this structure in all of their stories, and the only kind of stories they had ever heard were stories with this kind of chiasmic structure. – It's almost like for us when we hear seven notes from a scale. (Demonstrate – leaving off the octave, leaving off the final "Do".)

There's a lack of resolve to the story. In their minds, there's a piece missing. The piece is...? What the older son did.

In the first story, a son is far-off, but in the end he is found. In the second story, the son is far-off, in the end what does he do? That's the question Jesus poses to the Pharisees at the end of telling them about the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. Clearly in their minds, they were the older sons. They were the ones who had stayed around and tried to obey and served God like slaves. But in their hearts they were far-off. They didn't want to come to the party and celebrate the return of wayward sons who squandered their living in foreign lands. They didn't want to be near the father.

Jesus is saying, "The younger son understands and accepts that he was far-off and has been found. He admits he was lost. The father comes out to him and outrageously welcomes him back into the home. The older son, he's far-off too. And he's proud, because he knows he's not really all that bad of a guy. He's mad at the father, so he refuses to come in. The father comes out to him, in just as much humiliation as he comes out to his younger son. And he talks about rejoicing, and he asks the son to come in. Does the son come in? Do you come in?"

See, the point of this story is that ***The Father loves all His children so much that He is willing to suffer and be humiliated in order to bring us home.***

Will you come home? Will you let Him love you? Will you be in close relationship with Him? Will you acknowledge how much He loves you and respond to that love?

At the end of Cynthia's story in the drama, her momma says, "It doesn't matter what you've done, it doesn't matter what you've become, come home."

(Pray) Father, if we understand this story right, it's a description of the unbelievable way you love us, and your open-armed desire to have us enter your home and live with you.

Some of us want to come home today. Anybody want to come into the arms of God right now? – pray for them.

It's also an illustration to us about how much you long for those outside this room to come home too. God, as we enter into this new era, this era of New Song's history together, would you use us to invite and welcome people into this family, this home of yours. In Jesus name, Amen.

Friends, before you go, I want to mention that you might want to talk or have someone pray with you. There will be a couple of people upfront here in a minute, if you'd like to talk with them.

Then, during this series, we're trying to get in spiritual shape as we head towards this second verse of our church's history, which starts as soon as our anniversary is over. So I want to give you a couple of assignments before we dismiss.

One is, last week a whole bunch of us committed to praying the prayer that caused our original core to launch the church. The prayer goes, "***I don't ask you for much today, I just ask that You give me Your heart for lost people.***" Assignment #1 is to continue praying that prayer every day from now until Sept. 30, and to join us in praying it if you weren't here last week.

Assignment #2 would be to ***Invite someone to come home.*** According to some statistics, 1 out of 4 Americans say they would attend church if someone invited them. Look for someone this week and you just might find them.

Assignment #3 is to ***Get involved in the home during Verse 2.*** For those of you who don't know, Verse 2 is what we're calling the next 10 years of our history. The church is primarily a volunteer organization. To launch verse 1, 14 of us volunteered to hold down 46 jobs every Sunday so that others could be served. Right now, we have openings for over 100 positions that need to be filled. If you'd like to find a place you can serve, call the church office.

And now let's pray one more time. (Benediction.)