

Sermon File # 606

Scripture Text: Luke 15:11-32

Sermon Title: The Waiting Father and the Lost: the Parable of the Prodigal Son

Manuscript written by Roger Roberts and sermon preached

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The Waiting Father and the Lost: the Parable of the Prodigal Son

Introduction:

Open your Bibles to Luke 15:11-32.

As we continue to look into selected passages in the Third Gospel we look once more at the 15th Chapter, where Jesus is responding to the religious leaders and teachers who are criticizing his associating and even eating with “tax collectors and ‘sinners,’” that is, those of “doubtful reputation” (*The Message*, verses 1-2). As we noted last week, Jesus told the double parable of the lost sheep and lost coin, saying that he was sent by the Father on a search and rescue mission for those who are lost, that is, outside the kingdom of God. As we will see in our text, Jesus continues his defense of his association with those who are obviously outside the heavenly kingdom. He next tells the parable of the Prodigal Son, which is perhaps, with the possible exception of the parable of the Good

Samaritan, the best known of Jesus' parables. It has been called "The greatest short story in the world" (William Barclay) and "the Gospel within the Gospel" (Norval Geldenhuys, et. al.).

Follow as I read **Luke 15:11-32**.

Henri Nouwen (1932-1996) was one of the world's foremost teachers and writers on Christian spirituality in the latter half of the 20th Century. This Dutch Catholic priest, born in Nijkerk, The Netherlands in 1932, wrote 40 books on the spiritual life, which had a profound influence on thousands of followers of Christ. Several of his books have been a great encouragement to me, including *The Return of the Prodigal: a Story of Homecoming*.

In 1983, Nouwen was at a critical career juncture. He had enjoyed an illustrious career as a popular author and lecturer at various schools, most recently at Harvard University, and was active also in campaigning for social justice. He was contemplating a possible radical transition of careers, from esteemed Harvard professor to a pastor of mentally handicapped adults in one of the L'Arche communities, Daybreak, in Toronto Canada. While visiting a friend in L'Arche in France, as he was considering this career change, he saw a poster on her wall that grabbed his attention and which soon was to profoundly affect his life. It was a reproduction of the 17th Century Dutch painter Rembrandt van Rijn's famous depiction of the return of the prodigal son.



Nouwen made a pilgrimage to the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg, Russia (then, in '83, it was Leningrad) and spent numerous hours over several days studying this great work of art and jotting down his impressions. As he contemplated the painting, which shows the father gently embracing the prodigal, with the elder brother standing off to the side, Nouwen reflected on how this powerful depiction of the father's love actually became a portrait of his life. He noted about the painting that "all of the gospel was there." And in fact, he said, "all of my life was there" in that painting (See page 15, *The Return of the Prodigal: a Story of Homecoming*).

What Nouwen saw in that painting caused the story of the prodigal son to come to life for him, and he perceived his life depicted in the three main characters in the painting—the prodigal son, the elder brother and the father. The experience of Henri Nouwen with Rembrandt's painting and with our Scripture text prepared him for a critical juncture in his life when he would take a new direction in ministry. But even more profoundly this encounter with the prodigal son, the elder brother and the father gave him a better self-understanding and a renewed relationship with God.

I pray that you and I will also be able to better understand where we stand in our relationship with God as we look at the vivid picture in our text, first of...

The Rebellious Son

The younger son, who would have been at least 17 years of age, makes an unthinkable request of his father—to be given his inheritance (and being the younger son he would receive 1/3, perhaps less, of the inheritance) before his father's death. He was in fact saying to his father, "I can't wait until you die," or even "I wish that you were dead" (See Kenneth Bailey, pages 164ff, 205, *Poet and Peasant* and *Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke*). Amazingly, the father, who would have been justified in refusing or even by the law in condemning his son (Deuteronomy 21:18-21), grants his request. The son immediately sells off the property (which normally is held until the father dies, providing living security for the father), liquidates the assets of his inheritance and sets off for a distant country.

In this the younger son shows that he is...

Restless

The younger son is driven by his restlessness that tells him the world's lie—that freedom is to be found only away from parental authority and by one's own direction and instinct for liberty. He wanted desperately to experience life for

himself and on his own terms and by his own rules. He was oblivious to the fact that his father might have known what was best for him after all.

And this has been the beginning and definition of sin since the fall of Adam and Eve—the will to live independently of the heavenly Father and the proud thought that we know what is best for ourselves. The prodigal’s motivation continues to be repeated through the ages—that we must gratify our appetites in our own way and timing. It’s the failure to trust that the heavenly Father has a plan for our lives that includes the fulfilling of every appetite, which are God-given appetites. Like us, the younger son was rebellious because he was restless, unwilling to trust the father and to wait on the father to give him what was best in the fullness of time.

And his actions were...

Destructive

The younger son’s decision and actions were hurtful to the father and destructive to himself, his family and his community relationships. Going to a far-away Gentile country he disowned his heritage. And engaging in wild living, in violation of God’s word and will that he had been taught throughout his life, he was bringing disgrace to his father, his family and community. His new lifestyle of “freedom” also became self-destructive. He had not realized that to distance oneself from life-forming relationships is to lose one’s identity and integrity, and to disconnect from the father is to lose one’s own identity. He was alive on the outside but was dying on the inside.

The process of moral and spiritual death began the moment he decided to go his own way. Like the sheep that was lost, so he like a sheep went astray, he went his own way, the way toward moral and spiritual death (Isaiah 53:6). All along the father seemed to understand what this son had done to himself, when he says that he “was dead” (verse 32) even while he was alive.

Try as we may, our quest for freedom will always be confined to our mortality and to the limits of God’s natural and spiritual laws. “The wages of sin is death,” death to one’s true, God-created self (Romans 6:23). A skydiver without a parachute may enjoy his descent but eventually he will discover the consequences of the law of gravity. It’s not the fall from a height that hurts—it may even be thrilling. It’s the sudden stop on the ground that can kill you.

The pleasures of sin are indeed enjoyable while they last but are for a short season (Hebrews 11:25). God has made us for himself, and true and lasting pleasure is to live before him in “our Father’s house,” and he gives us the abundant and satisfying life our souls seek. When we live in disregard and defiance of his will and word, we become self-and-other-destructive.

And his rebellion resulted in his becoming...

Needy

As he squandered his wealth he no doubt attracted many “fair-weather friends” who were more than happy to help him waste his money on amusement and pleasure. But he also soon became victim of bad economic conditions brought on by a severe famine. “And he began to be in need” (verse 14). In the far country, he became jobless, friendless and homeless and a caretaker of pigs, animals that were abhorrent to Jews. He wasn’t even allowed to eat the rubbish with which he fed the pigs, and those who had helped him spend his money had turned their backs on him. In this pagan environment he wasn’t about to receive any charity (Joel Green says the “the practice of almsgiving was little observed among the Greeks and Romans.” See page 581, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT). He had left the environment of his fellow Jews, who alone of all cultures commonly practiced charity toward the needy.

He had experienced moral and spiritual death and now was close to physical death. He was desperately needy and realized there was nothing he could do to save himself. In that condition he came to his senses. Here we see that for this wayward sinner, grace was at work. Being dead in his transgressions and sins there was no life to enable him to come to his senses (Ephesians 2:1). A force beyond himself brought him to his senses, to “come to himself” (ESV).

All who come to God are made aware of a desperate need for him. And this awareness is a work of grace through the Holy Spirit. He alone can speak to the dead and raise us to life, as he did in Ezekiel’s valley of dry bones (Ezekiel 37:1-14). Apart from God’s initiative through the Holy Spirit there can be no repentance. It all begins with the voice of God speaking to us in the midst of our desperate need. God mercifully and graciously shows us that we are in the midst of spiritual death, and that we can do nothing to save ourselves.

The son thought of the father and trusted in his goodness to mercifully allow him to earn his way as a servant. And this led to his...

Returning

The younger son’s coming to his senses resulted in his decision to return to the father. Once the Spirit awakens, he enables the process of returning, which is the beginning of repentance. The prodigal still did not have an understanding of grace because he was planning to earn his way back to some level of favor with his father, family and community. Indeed he would face the hostility of the community upon his return, perhaps even physical harm. And in all likelihood the father would have conducted a formal ritual of divestiture, by which he would have officially disinherited and disowned his son. The son’s intention was to be a servant and by his service eventually return to his father what he had

squandered. The process of repentance was at work in the prodigal's heart in his humble movement from selfish living to surrender to his father's will. He began his rebellious departure with "give me" (verse 12); he ends his departure with "make me" (verse 19), in humble surrender. Likewise we must all come to the Father in humility, brokenness and surrender, saying "Make me."

But when he journeys back home he is met by his jubilant father, whose reception gives the wayward son a shattering expression of grace (See Bailey, page 206, above citation). The father, who had been waiting and yearning for the son's return for months, now sees him in the distance and runs to meet him. Repentance is complete, when the son's turning toward the father is met by grace, and the son realizes there is nothing he needs to do, indeed can do, to earn his father's favor and forgiveness. When he is in the embrace of his father, before the prodigal can give the speech he has rehearsed about being made one of the hired servants, his father interrupts with the command that he be given a robe, a ring, sandals and a feast—all symbolic of full restoration as a member of the family. We come to the Father in surrender, thinking there is something we must do to earn God's love and acceptance but are amazed by God's grace.

All the son can do now is simply accept his father's love and forgiveness and his restoring him back to his loving care. This is what it is to experience grace—to humbly receive God's mercy, forgiveness and love and to feel the embrace of a loving Father. This is what Henri Nouwen said spoke so powerfully to him about this story and Rembrandt's painting. Nouwen desperately needed to let the heavenly Father love him. Although he had remained faithful in his ministry vows and active in Christian service he had drifted in his heart from the awareness of God's love. And he realized he was unable to live and to love rightly until he allowed himself to be held in the loving, forgiving, accepting arms of the Father as the beloved (See page 12, above citation).

In the picture Jesus draws of the prodigal son, he is comparing this younger son with those who have obviously gone astray, those tax collectors and "sinners" of doubtful reputation. They have been living outside of God's law and will, yet are responding to the inviting grace of God who is calling them home through Jesus, whom they have gathered around to hear (verse 1).

Now Jesus has another picture to draw, that of...

The Resentful Son

The older brother obviously represents in Jesus' parable the Pharisees and teachers of the law, the self-righteous critics of Jesus' acceptance of "sinners," those outside the pale of official religion and acceptable behavior. In Rembrandt's picture, the older brother stands to the side and with jaundiced eye watches as the jubilant father embraces the younger son. Beginning with verse

25 we see the reaction of the elder brother to the father's reception of his returned brother. We see his anger and deep resentment toward his father for the way he received his brother. He is resentful because he is...

At home but far away

"Meanwhile, the older son was in the field...." (verse 25). This pictures the elder brother's emotional and spiritual distance from his father and brother, who were celebrating in the house. The elder brother was now the one in "a distant country" (c.f. verse 13). His resentment toward his brother and father, which have been building for months, perhaps years, now has come to a fever pitch.

Henri Nouwen, as he contemplated Rembrandt's painting that shows the elder brother's emotional distance from the father's embrace of the younger brother, painfully identified himself with the elder brother. This elder brother, says Nouwen, had become "lost in resentment," which is a frequent condition of those of us who are in religious/church service. This is a serious condition of the heart that gradually robs us of joy in service and leads to a condemning, joyless and resentful attitude. In this condition of heart it was impossible for the elder brother to join the celebration. Nouwen says that joy and resentment cannot co-exist (page 69, above citation).

It is possible, of course, to physically remain on the Father's property and even in his house, and be spiritually and emotionally distant. I too know what it's like to remain on duty in my church service and even in my ministry even during those times when my heart is not in it. The joy is gone and there is even the spirit of resentment in my heart. And I agree with Henri Nouwen that being converted from being an elder brother is more difficult than returning from the distant land of the prodigal son. Those of us who are lost in resentment are, just like the Pharisees, unlikely or even unable to see our lost condition. After all, we so familiar with religious experiences and have become experts at fixing everyone else's spiritual maladies and are unable to see our own (Nouwen, page 66, above citation).

The older brother, like the Pharisees and religious scholars that opposed Jesus, was resentful toward the father's embrace of the returned son because he was...

Slavishly obedient

When the father came out to urge the older brother to come join the festivities, he exploded in his father's face with an angry tirade. Refusing to address his father as his father, he shows that all along he had not thought of his father as the loving father that he was but rather as a slave master. Disrespectfully he said, "Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders...." (verse 29).

Perhaps the fundamental malady of mankind is the misperception of God the Father. And even those of us who are within the pale of the church seem to struggle at this very point. We tend to think of God as a tyrant who is interested only in ordering us around and demanding that we prove ourselves to him and prove our worth to him. This “god” that we create, of one who is never quite pleased with us, is formed in part by the marred image of “father” that many obtain in childhood, growing up under tyrannical, demanding fathers who are deficient in showing love and acceptance.

But this was not the kind of father that the older son was privileged to have and this is not the kind of heavenly Father we have. Our heavenly Father is more interested in our love and is keener on assuring us of his love than he is in our obsession with duties to perform. And we never have to earn his love—we have only to accept it and rest in the assurance of it.

If those of us who are “elder brothers or sisters” in the church could be converted, what a difference this would make in our joy, fellowship and service. It would resolve and melt away our resentment toward God for not “appreciating” and rewarding our hard work, and would remove our resentment toward others who don’t work as hard as we do and who seem to only enjoy and celebrate being a child of God instead of slavishly following all of the church rules.

The older brother was encased in resentment that was formed also by his being...

Self-centered and self-righteous

Like the Pharisees and teachers of the law, the older brother was fundamentally self-centered, self-righteous and sinful of heart. They were estranged from a love relationship with God the Father. The older son could not even say “father” or “brother.” He was totally self-centered. Unwilling to fulfill his responsibility at the feast as the elder brother, he boycotts the festivities and thinks only of what he has missed by not having a feast with his friends—a feast, by the way, to which his father and brother would certainly not have been invited (verse 29).

The elder brother too is self-righteous, that is, righteous outwardly and in his own eyes, but sinful in heart. He would have loved to have “sown his wild oats” too, but lacked the sense of adventure of his younger brother. He wanted to party with his friends, if only he could have done so secretly. Self-righteousness is the righteousness that we can fabricate, which always looks better in our eyes than in the eyes of God (who sees our righteousness as filthy rags. Isaiah 64:6). It is a legalistic righteousness that makes us slavishly conform to certain rules and judges and condemns everyone else for not living by our selected and preferred rules.

His self-righteousness also is seen in the way he condemns his brother. Of course, the prodigal “squandered his wealth in wild living” (verse 13). The ESV translates this as “reckless living,” and indeed we can assume that he was self-indulgent and careless in the far country. But it’s the older brother who is accusatory in saying that his brother squandered his father’s property with prostitutes (verse 30). This may indicate this is what the older brother would like to have done had he the nerve.

This exterior “righteousness” that is oblivious to inner sinfulness is what Jesus condemns in the Sermon on the Mount. Just because we refrain from outward acts does not mean we are righteous in God’s sight, says Jesus. It’s not enough to refrain from overt murder and adultery, for example. We show ourselves to be condemned sinners in need of God’s grace-given righteousness when we are unjustly angry with and alienated from our brother or sister or when we have a lustful heart (Matthew 5:21-30). We all stand before holy God in desperate need of his gift of righteousness that “surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law” (Matthew 5:20).

And so the older brother, the resentful son, stands condemned before his father, by whom he is...

Entreated

One of the many poignant and powerful aspects of this parable is the father’s entreating his elder son to join the festivities (verses 28ff). Although he could have been justly angry with his son for publicly humiliating him by refusing his role in the feast, the father earnestly entreats him to return from the field, his “distant country.”

He addresses him as “My child” (“teknon,” from “teknia” is translated “son,” but is literally “child.”), showing his tender affection for this grown son. He reminds and assures the older son that he has always been present with him and has access to every blessing in the household. In telling this, Jesus wants the Pharisees and religious teachers to realize that they too have had close access to the word and knowledge of the ways of God throughout history. They have been so close and yet spiritually so far away and blinded to what has been right in front of their eyes. Paul is addressing this advantage of the Jews in Romans 3:1ff. Similarly, the Father reminds us that he has been with us all along and given every opportunity to know him and receive his love.

I too have been entreated and wooed by the Father who has given me every advantage. He has been with me all along. He did place me in a believing family, where I was taught the word and ways of God through Christ. And I have had access to his love and the benefits of being his child. Yet, even with this, I have often drifted in my heart into a distant country.

Yet the Father never stops entreating because he is...

The Loving Father

Many interpreters say that the parable should be titled "The Waiting Father" instead of "The Prodigal Son" (e.g. the sermon and book of sermons on Jesus' parables, "The Waiting Father," by the popular German writer and preacher Helmut Thielicke). Indeed, the father in the parable is obviously the center of the action and is an unmistakable representation of the heavenly Father.

In his reflections on the parable and the Rembrandt painting, Henri Nouwen identifies himself with both the prodigal and the older son. But he says that the parable not only portrays something vitally important about the heavenly Father, but also beckons us to become like the father in the parable, like God himself (page 121, above citation).

The father was...

Rejected

Both the younger and the older son rejected their father's love and in fact, wished he were dead so that they could indulge in their inheritance. The prodigal rejected his father's love for the period of his rebellion, but the older son, as far as we know, continued to reject his love, just as the Pharisees were rejecting the loving Father by rejecting God's Son, Jesus.

This is a picture of the rejected God of Scripture, who for generation after generation held out his hands to a disobedient, rejecting people (Isaiah 65:2). Now the Father was being rejected by those who rejected his Son (John 1:11). The fullest expression of his rejection would be the cross, when the crowd refused to free Jesus and instead cried, "Crucify him...Crucify him!" (Mark 15:13-14). Centuries before Isaiah prophesied, "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering" (53:3).

If we would be like the Father and his Son we must be willing to share in his sufferings, including the rejection we will experience from the fallen world (John 15:18ff). To be like the Father is to love and long for the return of our enemies, those who wish we were dead, or at least "out of their way." This is the heart of the Father. The prophet Isaiah said to the rebellious nations,

"Yet the Lord longs to be gracious to you;
He rises to show you compassion" (30:18).

Despite his being rejected, the father continued...

Receiving

He completely and unconditionally welcomed both of his sons into his love. He never stopped loving and yearning for his wayward sons, both the outward rebel in the distant country and the inner rebel who remained at home. We can suppose that day and night the father yearned after, prayed for and looked toward the distant horizon where he might perhaps see his son returning home.

And in the same way the heavenly Father does not coerce our love, but gives us the freedom to love him or reject him, to abide in his love or to forsake his loving presence and fellowship. If we had no choice it would not be love but duty, just like the older resentful son.

The father's love was unconditional. Notice, when the rebel son came to his senses, his motives weren't exactly the most noble. He didn't say, "I disgraced and hurt my father and want to live from now on to honor him." Instead he said, "I'm going to die if I don't go back to my father's household. I don't have a choice if I want to survive." And we also need no other motive than our survival. We can't live without God, either here or in eternity. And we are forced to admit with Simon Peter, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). We too must admit we don't deserve the Father's love and cannot even purify our motives. We simply must come to him as beggars for his mercy and love.

The occasion of Jesus' parables in this chapter was the criticism of the Pharisees and religious teachers who accused Jesus of associating, especially at mealtime, with "sinners," those of doubtful reputation. "This man *receives* sinners and eats with them," they grumbled (verse 2, ESV). And Jesus responded by showing in the parable that the heavenly Father, like the father in the parable, eagerly and actively receives sinners.

When the father saw his returning son in the distance he laid aside all dignity and decorum and ran to meet his son. Says Bailey, "An Oriental nobleman with flowing robes never runs anywhere. To do so is humiliating" (See page 181, above citation). If only we knew how eager is the heavenly Father to receive us into his full love and fellowship!

Some have rejected the description of this great parable as "the Gospel in the Gospel," opining that there is nothing of the atonement, thus it presents a sentimental idea of God's simply overlooking sins and brushing off our guilt. But that expectation is to ask more of a parable than Jesus intended, which was to make a point and to emphasize a particular truth about God. Even so, there is the clear reference to the father's suffering love and his laying aside his dignity to come to us in his incarnation and the cross of utter suffering and humiliation (Philippians 2:5-8).

The father received the son unconditionally. And the father's acceptance brought about the son's full repentance of his rebellion and the work of...

Restoring

The rebel son had already rehearsed his speech he would give to his father, hoping to receive his favor and to be partially restored to the household as one of his father's hired servants (verse 19). But when he returns and is received his father doesn't even let him finish his speech. Instead, he immediately restores him to full sonship, giving the symbols of being an honored son—his father's best robe, a ring on his finger, sandals on his feet and a feast for the entire community to witness the son's reinstatement. Everyone, including the rebel son, would have fully expected the father to have formally and finally disinherited his son, but he does the opposite by officially reinstating and restoring him (pages 185-186, Bailey, above citation).

The heavenly Father, like the father in the parable, is looking for sons and daughters to love and not slaves to boss around. The father eagerly received the son and longed also for the resentful son to come to his senses and be reconciled with him and with the restored son.

The older brother could not be restored to the father or his brother without being restored to both. It was a family and he could not be selective. And for us, as John makes clear in his first letter, we cannot say we love God if we do not love and receive our brothers and sisters, even those with whom we disagree or those from whom we have alienated ourselves. The heart of the Father is a heart to reconcile us even with our enemies.

Several years ago I received word that my worst enemy died. This was a man who had been for almost two decades a constant critic of and opponent to my ministry in a former church and whose opposition led to a severe rift in the church's fellowship. More energy was spent in efforts of futile reconciliation with this man than perhaps was spent in the church's ministries. He was the type of person who resisted and opposed anyone he could not control. Few days passed during those years when I was not aware of his opposition and praying for God to protect and deliver both the church and me from his influence.

I'll have to admit that when I heard my enemy had died, I thought, "Well finally. He has had to face God and give an account to him." And then I realized that I was not thinking like the Father. The Father would yearn for this man to come to repentance and to come home to his love, mercy and grace. And I although I was able to pray for him and did so for years, I'm not so sure I yearned for him to be restored and reconciled to the Father or to me. And if this man came to know the Lord and came to repentance and complete trust in Jesus he was received into heaven with...

Rejoicing

And for me to be like the father in the parable and the Father in heaven, I too would receive my enemy with rejoicing. The heavenly Father rejoices when anyone repents, including my worst enemy. All of the parables in this 15th chapter lead to the celebration that follows the recovery of the lost. The joy is unavoidable when we have a heart like God's heart. Joy, as CS Lewis says, is the serious business of heaven and without joy and rejoicing over the presence of God and his reclaimed people we are not feeling, being and acting like God.

Our joy and rejoicing would be greater if we had a clearer understanding of the magnitude of God's mercy, grace and forgiveness provided through the cross of Christ. We also would be more likely to rejoice if we had the Father's perspective of our salvation and a greater comprehension of the riches we have been given in Christ Jesus. The father in the parable rejoiced because his son "was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (verse 32). And the heavenly Father knows just how dead, lost and hopeless we were till he found us and brought us to life. The older son, although he had access to the father's wealth, obviously had become oblivious to them (verse 31). Paul says that we rejoice in the Lord as we realize his presence and give thanks for his many gifts and benefits to us, those many things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy (Philippians 4:4-8).

A test to the church is the level of our joy and whether our worship is truly joyous or whether it is more of the dutiful and perfunctory performance of elder brothers and sisters, who resent God and one another for not doing more for us. And so the question remains, who are we like, the rebel son or the resentful son? And the only way out, as was true for Nouwen, is to become like the father.

Conclusion:

Henri Nouwen was poised to change careers when he encountered the prodigal son, in Scripture and in painting. And he knew he was tired and spent from his years of teaching and social activism. He wanted to respond to a new calling to minister as a pastor to the mentally handicapped. But to do so joyfully and effectively he needed to come home, from the distant country of rebellion and resentment. For him the way back to the father and to become like the Father was the Beatitudes, to become poor in spirit; to mourn over sin; to meekly hunger and thirst to be like God; to be a merciful, pure-in-heart peacemaker for God and to be willing to suffer with him and for him (Matthew 5:3-10). I don't know where you are, whether in open rebellion or inner resentment, but like Nouwen and like me, you need to know that "both sons can be transformed into the father" (page 133, Nouwen, above citation).

The turning point for the prodigal son was when he said “I will arise and go to my father” (verse 18, ESV). This is the turning point for us today. I pray for the mercy and grace of the loving, waiting Father to enable us to say, “I will arise and go to Jesus.”

Comments and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. What do you think were the motives that prompted the younger son to leave home?
2. In what ways is our quest for personal freedom and autonomy liable to be destructive, to ourselves and to others?
3. Describe the process of the prodigal son’s return to his father (in verses 17-20) and compare this with your return to God.
4. In what way(s) was the older son farther away from his father than the prodigal? Do you think the older brother’s repentance and return would have been more difficult? In what ways?
5. How is it possible or even likely that dutiful, faithful and diligent religious/church service can foster a spirit of resentment and self-righteousness?
6. What are the characteristics of the father in the parable and how do they reflect our heavenly Father?
7. Which of the two sons best describes your spiritual condition, past and present, and what steps must you take to return to the Father? To become like the Father?

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