



God's Divine Design Under Attack – Part 8
Various Scriptures
GCSP – 08/30/2008

Charles Dickens and Ralph Waldo Emerson called it the greatest short story ever written. William Shakespeare borrowed and adapted parts of the story when he wrote "The Merchant of Venice" and "Henry IV." Shakespeare also refers to the story in several of his other plays. Most of you here tonight could probably tell the basic story on the spot if I asked you to do so.

Any guesses? I am referring to what we know as the story of the prodigal son. That is probably not the best title for this parable of our Lord because the prodigal is only one of three main characters in the story: The father and the brother of the prodigal also play key roles in the story, and quite honestly the focus of the story is actually the brother, in view of Jesus' original audience. The brother represents the Pharisees and religious leaders of Israel, and they were the ones the story was directed to – but that's a sermon for another time.

Tonight we are going to focus on the relationship between the prodigal and the father. This series has been all about the marriage relationship but it was suggested that I at least touch on the parent/child relationship before we move on. Most of us here tonight no longer have our children living in the home and I am sure many of you can relate in some ways to the story of the prodigal son. Maybe you have a prodigal or maybe you were one yourself, but this parable seems to have touched more lives through the years than most.

Turn with me in your Bibles to **Luke 15**.

Luke 15:11-32

This is an amazing story indeed. Let's pray before we pull just some of the great truths and lessons from this masterpiece of our Lord.

The context of this parable and the reason Jesus was telling this parable comes from the resentment of the Pharisees and the scribes over Jesus associating with the riff-raff and the outcasts of Jewish society.

Luke 15:1-3

The Pharisees and the scribes didn't get it; they didn't understand or know God, they didn't understand God's message, and they definitely didn't understand Jesus. They were grumbling and complaining and criticizing because Jesus spent time with tax collectors, prostitutes, and all manner of sinners. Jesus had no problem going to the lower echelons of society to proclaim the Good News and to show His love for them.

And let me make a side point while we are here. What gives us the right to look down on other people? Why do we show preference to one over another? And I am not talking about outside the walls of this church I'm talking about inside the church. Some of you in here tonight have ought against your brothers or sisters because they rub you the

wrong way, or because they come from a different background, or because they live their life differently than you do, or who knows what the reason is?

When you do this, when you act this way, you are aligning with the scribes and Pharisees. When you make distinctions between people you are doing the exact opposite of what Jesus did. When in your mind you and in your actions you choose to shun one of God's children you are guilty of being self-righteous and you are elevating yourself above your brother or sister, which in essence means you are elevating yourself above Jesus.

This is the position the scribes and Pharisees had put themselves in; by looking down upon the people of Jewish society who were not like them they were also looking down on Jesus. In response, Jesus attempts to show them the error of their ways through three consecutive parables: The lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son.

Look at the end result of each of these parables.

v. 6

"Rejoice with me!"

v. 9

"Rejoice with me!"

v. 24

"And they began to celebrate."

Jesus is saying to the scribes and Pharisees, and to us, "Wake up and smell the coffee! Don't you see and understand what brings joy to God the Father? What pleases God and what ignites rejoicing and celebration in heaven is the recovery of sinners and the loving and unbridled fellowship of His children."

And just to finish my side point before we look at the relationship between the father and the prodigal son in the third parable, how can we be right with God when we are differentiating between which saints we choose to associate with when God and all of heaven are rejoicing over any sinner that comes into the fold? Aren't we in essence spoiling the party by telling the host, "You shouldn't have invited him or her"?

In His parables Jesus would always draw the audience into the story. He would tell the story in such a way that the hearers would be nodding in agreement with what was going on. And then Jesus would introduce a twist that would be like a knife to the heart as the Pharisees would shockingly realize that Jesus was talking about them.

The problem with the scribes and Pharisees was they allowed their pride to stop them from a proper response. Instead of repentance they became indignant and just stuck their noses up higher in the air than they were before. I pray when each of us find ourselves on the pages of Scripture in this light that we will choose to repent of the ugliness in our hearts and correct our ways.

Well, let's get to our story and our application for tonight.

v. 11-12

The first thing I want you to notice is the word prodigal never appears in the text. It is an apt description of the younger son in the story but Jesus never uses the word. Does anyone know what the word means? Literally a prodigal could be defined as a "spend-thrift." A prodigal is one who wastes. In this story the younger son not only wastes his substance and inheritance, he is wasting his life.

In the Middle Eastern culture of that time, the request from this younger son was outrageously shocking and shameful. Estates and inheritances were never divided until the father was dead. Requesting your share of the estate while the father was still alive was disrespectful and it displays a total lack of love for the father. By his request and actions, the younger son was basically saying, "I wish you hurry up and die already so I could have my money."

This culture was primarily based on honor. Even though the scribes and Pharisees did not truly know God they still made every effort to adhere to the Ten Commandments in their own self-righteous way; and one of those commandments was to honor your father and your mother. So this is an outrageous request in their eyes. Jewish culture would demand that this son be cast out of the family and be considered as dead.

We see this type of behavior still today in the Middle East and in the ultra-orthodox communities of Judaism here in our country. Disrespect for the authority of the family is cause for execution in some countries and cultures or being ostracized and excommunicated in others. Many times a family and a community will actually hold a public funeral to symbolically tell the world that this son or daughter is no longer alive in our eyes. All contact is cut off. The only way back into the family was through great restitution and considerable time to compensate for the dishonor.

Being the younger son in this parable would mean that his portion was one-third of the estate. The firstborn son always received a much greater share; twice as much as the other son or sons would receive. The next shock in this story is that the father grants the request when he had no obligation to do so. According to Jewish custom if a father did divide up the estate while he was still alive, he still had ultimate authority over the use of the money and possessions. The son could have his say but the father could still step in and overrule.

v. 13a

The implication is that the younger son sold off all the land and possessions to convert everything into cash.

v. 13b

He quickly wastes every cent he had. In a short period of time all of the money was gone. The term "**loose living**" implies an immoral lifestyle which is confirmed later in the story when the older brother speaks of the fact that the younger brother "**devoured your wealth with prostitutes.**" He just totally blows all the money. He didn't put any aside, he didn't purchase some property or invest some, he wasted all of it and had nothing to show for it.

v. 14

The bad gets worse.

When you dabble with sin you are asking for a whole lot more trouble than you bargained for. I would assume all of us have had to watch people we love going down paths in their life that breaks our hearts. You try to warn them and you do all that you can to help them avoid the devastation they are heading for, but in the end you usually have to let go because there is no stopping them. They have to learn for themselves and the lesson usually doesn't sink in until they have reached the proverbial bottom.

You would think that a severe famine would be the bottom. You would think that he would humble himself and admit his sins, but pride has a tight grip on this man. He may admit he made a few mistakes but he is still bound and determined to work his way out of this on his own terms.

And just to add a little understanding to how low this guy is we need to have some comprehension about famines. We are quite honestly clueless in our understanding of famines. All of our food comes from the grocery store. Our nation is so prosperous that even if America was hit with a severe famine we could buy food on the world market and still keep our stores relatively stocked with food.

Severe famines in Bible times meant starvation and disease. One description of a famine in the 1800's depicts dead bodies stacking up on the streets and when an edict was handed down by the king that every man was responsible to dump any dead bodies in front of his home into the river, people began dragging bodies that were laying in front of their home over to someone else's home. Fights began to break out over where someone walking on the streets actually died. Some would lock themselves inside their homes to die so the ravenous dogs and other animals would not eat them after they died.

Famine in those days meant no food available anywhere. And this was not yet the bottom for the prodigal son.

An old Southern Gospel song aptly says, "Sin will take you farther than you want to go." The prodigal is beginning to see this but he isn't willing to let go of his pride just yet.

v. 15

The word "**hired**" is not a good translation for us to fully understand what is going on here. It doesn't mean the prodigal found a paying job. It literally means he "attached" himself to this citizen, meaning he made a nuisance of himself in his begging and the man finally told him to go work in his pig pen with no promise of any pay or food or anything. The prodigal was going out to work with no guarantee of any compassion or pay or food. Times were desperate and people would do desperate things.

Now remember the audience Jesus is speaking to and then consider their reaction to the fact that this man is now feeding swine. The crowd is shocked by this story once again.

v. 16

If you have ever been on a farm and seen pigs eat you would be very offended when someone tells you that you were eating like a pig. Pigs have no courtesy and no care for any other pig when it comes time to eat. It's every pig for himself as they crowd each other out and devour every thing they can devour is as little time as possible. Pigs don't casually graze and they aren't picky about what goes in their mouth.

The prodigal is so hungry that he is dreaming about getting down on all fours and trying to crowd in with them to eat their slop. And pig slop is about as disgusting as it gets. Pig slop is basically garbage. As a matter of fact not too many years ago pig farmers were also garbage collectors. They would literally boil the garbage they collected in these massive boilers and use it for pig slop.

This is the sinner; poor, hungry, hopeless, and trying to get a little pig slop to fill his belly with. Nobody is there to help and nobody is there to pity him.

Can you see the highbrow elitist Pharisees reacting to this story at this point? They are probably getting a little queasy by now while at the same time they are probably thinking this man is getting what he deserved.

v. 17

Finally he has hit the bottom. I mean, what has he got left to be proud of? It's amazing how far we will allow our pride to take us. It may be obvious to everyone around us but we refuse to see it for what it is.

The prodigal realizes that the slaves at his father's house live like kings in comparison to this. He comes to his senses and sees life in a whole different light. The thing about reaching rock bottom is you can only look up from there, which is what God has been looking for you to do all along.

The world cannot satisfy. Trying to live like the world will only end in disaster.

v. 18-20a

True repentance is displayed in these few verses. There is a detailed admission of sin, there is an understanding of what is deserved, there is an acceptance of whatever penalty and punishment is required, and there is an action of turning away from the sin and turning to God.

Repentance is not lip service. Repentance requires action. Repentance requires going to the one you have sinned against and making it right.

All of that was introduction to the point I want to make in relation to our series on relationships – especially how we are to respond to the prodigals in our lives.

v. 20b

Apart from knowing the culture of the day you will miss some tremendous truth of this story – and you would miss another shocker to the scribes and Pharisees.

The prodigal would have been an outcast not only from the father's house but also in the whole city. When an outcast who had brought shame and disgrace to his family

entered the city, the townspeople would have begun to hurl insults at him, they would most likely throw things at him, spit upon him, and even beat him. He would be required to sit in the town square and endure this ridicule for as long as a week. At that point the father would come to the square and accept or reject his son. Acceptance meant the son could walk behind the father and return to the estate but could not enter the house. He would have to sleep outside or amongst the hired help. The father would not speak to the son and would barely acknowledge his presence. This could go on for months.

The picture we have in this story is that the father was always looking on the horizon for his son's return. Even though his son had turned his back on the father and wished he was dead, the father's love had never waned; the father's hope had never faded; that father anticipated the day when his son would return. And when he saw him about to enter the city he cast his own pride aside and ran through the center of town to protect his son from the abuse of the townspeople.

(Play song – "When God Ran")

v. 20b-24

Notice the father doesn't scold the son. There is no "I told you so" and no demeaning him. The father doesn't ask what he did with all the money, he doesn't comment about the shape he is in or how bad he smells, and he doesn't allow his own pride to get in the way of exhibiting his love in the center of town.

Instead the father says to bring out the best robe and put it on him. The best robe was reserved for the master of the household on special occasions. The best robe signified the highest rank in the household; one who is to be honored and revered. The father was saying by this action that everything I have is yours. The best of what I have is given to you. The robe represented honor.

He then tells them to put a ring on his hands. This would be the signet ring. A signet ring in those days was what you used to seal any documents that were to be delivered. You would roll up the scroll, pour some hot wax on the edge and impress the ring into the way to signify who it was from and so the recipient could see if the document had been opened before it arrived to its destination. The ring represented authority.

He then told his servants to get sandals and put them on his feet. Only servants and hired men were barefoot. Only the masters and sons of the house wore sandals. The sandals represented full pardon and full restoration as his son.

In doing all of this the father was disgracing himself. This is no way for a nobleman to act. The son had dishonored the father and brought shame upon the entire household and the entire city for that matter. The son should be punished and ridiculed and scorned not rewarded and restored, at least not for quite a while. He should have to earn his position and status.

This is how God has treated us. In the midst of our sin and rebellion, in the filthiness of our pride and selfishness, and in the ugliness of our treatment of Him, He runs to us at the moment we truly repent. He puts the honor of His name upon us, He gives us the

authority over His kingdom, and He restores our position as His child with all of the benefits and rights that accompany being a child of the King.

Is this how we treat our children? Are we ready to accept them regardless of the shame they have brought to the family?

Oh, but Pastor Al, you don't know what he's done and you don't know how bad she was.

It doesn't matter. Do you have any understanding of how vile and ugly and disgusting our sin is in the eyes of a holy God? Do you realize what God truly did when He stooped down to our level in the form of Jesus Christ the Son?

"But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8 – NASB).

God's love for us didn't wait. Notice in the story that the father ran to the son and embraced him and kissed him before the son said a word. God sent Jesus to die for our sins before we repented. While we were still living a life of sin, while we were still knee deep in the pig slop, and while we were still His enemies according to **Romans 5:10**, that is when God ran to us; that is when Christ died for us.

Maybe your prodigal is one of your parents. Maybe your prodigal is a brother or sister. Regardless of who it is, you do not have the right to withhold your love from them.

Follow God's example. Be ready for the slightest move. They need to be rescued and they cannot do it on their own.

Let's pray.