**Message #2**

**The Prodigal Story**

**What Lessons Can We Learn?**

**Memory verse: Luke 15:31-32** *“My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again, he was lost but now is found.”*

*Christopher Yuan grew up with his parents in Chicago in a home that did not know Christ but with traditional Chinese values. Obey your parents, do well in school and practice piano! As Christopher now tells his story to the world, he says that he did all of those things but he had a secret that he kept all the way through school and even the marine corps reserves, but when he moved to Louisville Kentucky and began Dental school he kept his secret no longer. He lived openly as a homosexual in the gay community and went home and told his parents. They were devastated but God in his grace through the gospel presented to her in a pamphlet accepted God’s free gift and became a Christian and embraced the message that as God loved her in her sin, she could love her son in his. A few months after Christopher’s mother dedicated her life to Christ, his father followed.*

*Meanwhile Christopher began to experiment with drugs and became not on a user but a dealer. He was a graduate student by day and promiscuous drug dealer by night. However his double life ended when 4 months prior to graduation, he was expelled. He moved to Atlanta Georgia and took over the drug business to the gay community. He admitted to having multiple anonymous sexual encounters per day.*

*His parents had no idea of these circumstances but the focused on the only thing they knew that mattered, their son’s relationship with Jesus. He received cards every other day filled with scripture that he never read as he angrily threw each one into the trash. They eventually visited him but after two days he kicked them out, but his dad left a Bible on the table, which he also threw in the trash. They left convinced he was totally lost and unreachable short of a miracle.*

*His mother began to not focus on the hopelessness but rather on the promises of God. She and over 100 prayers warriors began to pray. She fasted every Monday for 7 years and once fasted 39 days in a row. She prayed a constant prayer, “God do whatever it takes”. She prayed for a miracle and that miracle came one day in the form of 12 DEA agents and two German shepherds knocking on his door. They confiscated 9.1 tons of marijuana and all of his money and faced felony charges that would bring 10 years to life.*

*He eventually called his mother to tell her he had been arrested and without condemnation she asked if he was alright. Upon hanging up the phone she was convinced this call was the answer to her prayers. She felt like she should do what the old hymn said, “Count your blessings one by one.” So she tore off a piece of adding machine tape and wrote down, Christopher is in a safer place. He called me for the first time in years. That list began to grow until it was longer and taller than she was.*

*3 days later while walking around the cell block he noticed a garbage can and identified his life as being similar, stinking, and surrounded by trash. He states that as he was about to walk by he noticed something on top of the trash and picked up a new testament Gideon’s Bible. He read through the book of Mark that night. At first he had no expectations, just bored and needed something to occupy his time. Just when he thought nothing could get any worse, he was called to the jail nurse’s office where she informed him that his blood work showed he was HIV+. He felt hopeless and lost and more devastation than any felony conviction could impart.*

**Introduction**

Christopher is a prodigal, much like the prodigal son described in Luke 15. This parable serves as the inspiration for the name of the Prodigal Ministry. It is one of the most well known stories in the Bible. In this message we will attempt to flush out the principles contained within this important passage as they give us great insight into the character of God. The more we understand and know God, the greater hope and direction we have.

**Definition**

* (Webster) Prodigal : profuse or wasteful spending; reckless or lavish behavior
* (Prodigal ministry-Luke 15): one who is “lost” and walking apart or far from God
* **Prov 18: 1-2** *He who separates himself and seeks his own desire, he quarrels against all sound wisdom; a fool that does not delight in understanding, but only in revealing his own mind*

**The Prodigal Son (Luke 15)**

Luke Chapter 14 places Jesus at a feast in the home of a prominent Pharisee. Toward the end of the chapter, Jesus has left the feast and is travelling with a great crowd. Luke 15:1-2 tells us that people from all walks of life are listening to Jesus’ message, his disciples, skeptical Pharisees, and inquisitive sinners not even sure what they are looking for. In chapter 15, Jesus tells three related stories that make the same point and give us great insight into the heart, purpose, and love of God. To understand the story of the Prodigal Son, the last of the three, we must first look at the two short parables that precede it.

* **Luke 15:3-7 The Lost Sheep**
	+ The parable describes a shepherd that leaves his 99 sheep at hand to go and search for the one lost sheep. The shepherd rejoices joyously for the one sheep he finds as Jesus summarizes the point of the parable.
	+ *“I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.” V.7*
* **Luke 15:8-10 The Lost Coin**
	+ Jesus describes a woman who has ten silver coins and loses one. She stops all she is doing to diligently search for the lost coin. Once found, she calls friends and neighbors to celebrate. Again, Jesus closes this short story to point out the same principle as outlined above.
	+ *In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” V 10*

**Luke 15:11-31 The Prodigal Son : Highlights**

* V12 The younger son asks for his share of the estate
	+ Such a request was entirely inappropriate for a couple of reasons. First of all, sons were to gain their inheritance only upon their Father’s death. Also the elder son should get 2/3rds of the portion. The prodigal son asked for more than his share (half), and by asking for his inheritance now was, in essence, wishing his father dead. This would seem totally inappropriate to the Pharisees (Deut. 21:18-21) while possibly understandable to the sinners.
	+ The father divides the property as requested, which allows the prodigal’s choice of obedience or disobedience.
* V13 The prodigal son chooses disobedience and rebellion.
* V 14-15 young son squandered his wealth; famine struck
	+ Friends disappeared; no support, no help, homeless
	+ Sin and disobedience led to isolationas noted in Isaiah 59:1-2 *Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.* **Note: Sin always leads to greater isolation and separation from God.**
	+ He was desperate to seek work, feeding pigs, which would have been detestable to a Jew
	+ Jesus is describing in the verses above a son who disrespected, dishonored, and abandoned his father and his Jewish faith, as well as dishonored himself. The prodigal son was lost in every way.
* KEY VERSE: v 17 “**when he came to his senses**”
	+ The father did not get in the way. He allowed the Prodigal to reap what he had sown. The Prodigal had a vision and a plan that turned into disaster as he lived out a verse applicable to almost all prodigals. (Prov.14: 12) As a consequence of his decisions, he was now powerless, desperate, inadequate, and with no solutions. The Prodigal Son had finally hit his bottom and was convicted.
	+ 2 Cor. 7:8-10 talks of *worldly sorrow* that leads to death versus *Godly sorrow* that leads to repentance. Consequences can lead to guilt and greater despair or it can lead to conviction that leads to repentance. The Prodigal had hit the bottom that we all pray for our Prodigals; consequences that force them to stop, turn from their ways, and head for home. As “He came to his senses”, he lived out Romans 12:2 as he was transformed by the renewing of his mind. He had a paradigm shift as he realized His Father was where life truly resided. The parable doesn’t tell us the details but we know that no matter what the circumstances, the Prodigals eyes were opened by God alone, a free gift. See Eph. 2:8-10
	+ V 18-19 The son stated that he had sinned against heaven and against His father. He was no longer worthy to be called his son. The Prodigal finally had the proper view of both himself and his father. (see Job 42:5-6)
	+ V 20 *“but while he was a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.”* Some commentaries state this story should be termed the Prodigal Father since the definition of prodigal is often uses to mean extravagant or wasteful. This response to the Prodigal’s return is a show of extravagant grace and mercy.
	+ V 22-24 there was feasting and great celebration for the Prodigal son’s return …”for this son of mine was dead and is alive; he was lost and is found. “

The response of the Father is often misunderstood and misinterpreted by parents of prodigals. Parents may question how such a response is warranted. The answer lies in understanding fully Jesus’ message in this parable and by clearly identifying whom the Father represents in this story. .

**What is the Main Point of the Prodigal Son Parable?**

 We must look at the parable in context. Jesus is teaching in chapter 15 of Luke about the value of a single sheep, a single coin, and finally a single lost soul. The father’s comment in verse 24 are telling when he repeats why he has called for a celebration. The father stated that the son was lost and now is found and equated that to being dead, yet now alive. The father is so overjoyed because he knew full well the outcome of a way of life of rebellion. Eternal separation from God in hell is so unthinkable and heartbreaking that when anyone comes to his or her senses and returns, it is cause for celebration, even over one single lost soul. ***This parable is not about parenting,*** per se. **It is about salvation** and the decision to follow God by believing in Jesus. The parable is about the value of a single rebellious, wretched, selfish soul to God. In this parable we can see that God is not looking for a resume’, he is looking for a broken spirit, a humble heart, and a genuine realization of the depth of one’s own sin that drives one to the choice of a relationship with Him above all else.

**The Father’s response**

 In the Father’s response, we see a picture of God and how He treats and views us. We should be encouraged by several key observations.

* God loves us enough to allow us to suffer the consequences of our actions and to see how our lives will turn out if lived in our own sinful way.
* God never takes his eyes off us and is always watching for our return
* If we truly understand our own sinfulness and worth as well as understand God’s greatness, mercy, grace and worth, then He will not only allow us to enter His presence in our unrepentant sin, but He will celebrate our broken, grateful return.
* God does not dwell on past sins if our heart is repentant. He died for those sins and forgives us.

The father’s response can often be confusing to parents who view such easy forgiveness and celebration as enabling of a son who has wasted half of his father’s estate and comes home only when he has no alternative. Again, if this was a story about parenting, those concerns would be warranted, but we must remember that parables are told to drive home a point and have a clear focus. One must be very careful not to read too much into parables. The Father’s response is appropriate here and not enabling because **the Father in this story represents omniscient God**, who knows the prodigal son’s heart is sincere and repentant. God knows the sincerity of our heart equally well. The prodigal has truly returned so celebration is appropriate.

 With omniscient knowledge of the prodigal son, we see why God would accept the son willingly and with thanksgiving celebration. A lost sinner has been found. He was dead in his sins, but is alive through God’s grace. Take heart knowing that God is as excited about your salvation and relationship with Him as the prodigal son’s.

 Grace is truly amazing. The more you are aware of the depth of your sin and what you truly deserve, the more likely you are to like the message of the Prodigal son!

**How do we know when our Prodigal has truly returned home?**

 Since we are not omniscient and not God, we will not know for sure when our Prodigal has returned home. As loving parents we should always be “standing at the window”, hoping and praying for our prodigal’s return. We will always love them. However our trust in them has to be ***earned.*** Their wasteful, irresponsible, disrespectful actions have caused harm and have eroded our trust in them. It takes time for them to regain that trust. So what are indications that our children can be trusted again?

 Simply stated, they stop acting stupid! This thought may seem crass or may be viewed as an oversimplification, but let’s look at Proverbs 12:1 *Whoever loves discipline, loves knowledge, but he who hates correction is stupid*. (Emphasis mine) When our prodigals are rebellious, they have no interest in discipline or correction. In fact, our advice is often treated with disdain or anger. However when our prodigals are truly repentant, they acknowledge their own responsibility for the chaos and damage they caused. They listen to reason and begin to understand and accept the discipline that brings them knowledge and life. Often they finally ask for help. Such a response is so unthinkable for the prodigal’s parents, spouses, and family members that they often can’t believe it is possible, so they accept compromise and manipulation. However, a prodigal returns only with a “renewing of the mind” by the grace of God, that leads to a long obedience in the same direction. Said in a different way, we simply must see their responsibility, brokenness, and humility played out over time in actions, not words. (I John 3:18)

“Often we get this backward. We won’t change our minds, won’t revise our attitudes, until someone - God, a parent, divorce, a spouse, a child, a coworker-changes our circumstances…But this is not how God works. *Be transformed by the renewing of your mind*. Romans, 12:2**.** Under God’s economy, nothing really changes until our minds do. Transformation is the fruit of a changed outlook. First our minds are renewed, and then we are transformed, and everything is different, even if it stays the same. **God is more interested in changing your thinking than in changing your circumstances.” Phil 2:5-8**

*The Rest of God*, Mark Buchanon

 The most promising sign and best prognosticator of a long lasting complete paradigm shift or “renewing of the mind” is evidence of a heart change that is fully committed to God. Addiction is rarely overcome by trying harder. **A prodigal who simply falls in love with Jesus will begin to change because of that love.** Anyone who simply tries to be obedient without heart change can rarely sustain it.

Jesus himself speaks to this concept in a story he tells in Matthew 12:43-*45 When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, “I will return to the house I left. When it arrives, it finds the house swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that man is worse than the first. That is how it will be with this wicked generation.*

 The point of Jesus’ teaching here gives great insight into how we can be more assured of our prodigal’s “return”. As they sweep their house clean by going to recovery and saying all the right things for a season, they are in a better place. We agree with St. Augustine who stated that the heart has a void in it that only Jesus can fill. Our prodigals can fill that heart defect with self, drugs, sexual addiction, perversion, or any number of idols. When they hit their bottom, they can remove those false idols for a season, but Jesus says in essence, unless they fill it with me, the recovery is short-lived. So a prodigal that returns and finds true relationship with God will have his or her mind renewed. Such change is evidenced in a life lived for God and not themselves. That is the greatest evidence of a true prodigal’s return.

The prodigal Father in our parable obviously knew the prodigal son was returning home truly repentant seeking to serve Him faithfully. He was willing to serve, not by obligation, but because his eyes had been opened and he desired a loving relationship.

**The Older Brother**

 Before we leave this parable, we must painstakingly look at the older brother’s response. Jesus included him in the parable for a reason.

* Luke 15:28-30 We find the older brother obediently working in the field, initially unaware of the younger brother’s return. When he learned of all that was going on and the celebration planned, he was angry and resentful. He lashed out at the Father stating, “Look! All these years I have been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never even gave me a young goat to celebrate with my friends”
* Luke 15:31-32 The father responds with the truth of the situation. *“My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again, he was lost but now is found.”*

Sadly, the older brother’s response clearly defines the sin and misplaced priorities in his own life. His statements show that he felt like a “slave”, **working out of obligation, not love.** He obviously felt that if he worked for the Father, he deserved the rewards. In essence, *the older brother wanted God for the things God could give him rather than wanting relationship with God first and foremost.*

 The father obviously realized this misplaced priority, as he responded “you are always with me”. The father wanted that to be enough. Relationship with God is the ultimate prize, not the “stuff” we attempt to gain by working for Him. The older brother represented the Pharisees perfectly and unfortunately he represents many of us. Jesus loves us enough to speak truth to all who listen so that we might repent and return home, whether we are the younger or the older brother. Many in this way have said it. *“We are not accepted and loved because of our obedience, we are obedient because we are accepted and loved.”*

**Where are you in the story?**

**What if this current Prodigal struggle is about You?**

We have learned from experience in the Prodigal ministry that every person comes to Prodigal because they love their own prodigal and want them to get well. They want peace in the midst of chaos. However, few realize initially that this journey is as much about them as it is their prodigal. No matter where you see yourself in this story, the truth is that our journey is ours alone. Our prodigal trouble is well known to God and we have no idea how it will run it’s course. We can only control ourselves in this journey. *Control of our prodigals is a mirage*. So prudently we should focus first and foremost on the only thing we can control, ouselves. God uses hardship to train us in righteousness and to make us holy. Hebrews 12:1-13 explains clearly that this is how a loving God works in our lives. It is worth your time to look closely at these verses. They are a cornerstone to the principles of this ministry.

 Consider the following verses that make very sobering points.

Matt. 7:21 refers to the fact that not everyone who says to me, “Lord Lord” will enter the Kingdom of heaven. Luke 25:1-13 tells a chilling story of the Ten Virgins which ends with the virgins who were caught unprepared when Jesus returned. The lord told them, “I tell you the truth, I don’t know you”. Finally Rev. 3:15-16 explains clearly that Jesus does not want “lukewarm” or half hearted, partly dedicated, intermittent followers. He says that he will spit you out of his mouth.

 We are not here to judge. We are here to ask questions and sharpen those who have asked for help. If you are saved and a believer, celebrate! However, are you also fully devoted? Are you walking in a manner worthy of your calling? We only want to ask the question and have you honestly search your own heart. We thank God for the conviction of His Word and for people who have sharpened us in our lives with the same or similar questions. What if God has good works planned out for you, but needs you more fully devoted in order to carry them out? (Eph. 2:10) What if a God that promises to “work all things for good to those who are called according to His purpose” is going to work through your prodigal chaos to get your attention and mold and shape you into the woman or man He has always wanted you to be? ***What if this journey is about YOU?***

*After learning that he was HIV+, he went back to his bunk. Laying on his back, he looked up and something caught his eye. Looking closer, someone had written something on the bed above him. “If your bored, check out Jeremiah 29:11” For I know the plans I have for you”, declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. “*

*He began to realize that this New Testament was not ink on a page, but the living active word of God, sharper than any double edged sword, penetrating even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. The grace of the Lord began to open his eyes to the truth. His heart was softened toward the gospel and the Word to the point that he felt led to go into the ministry. He called his mother from prison where he was serving a lenient 6 year sentence and send him an application to the only seminary he had ever heard of, Moody Bible Institute. He needed references from other believers and the only three he had were from the prison chaplain, a prison guard, and a fellow inmate. By God’s grace, he was accepted. He is now a seminary professor and he and his mother have written a powerful book, Out of a Far Country. Remember those blessings written on the tape? Christopher and his mother report that at this point that tape is longer and taller than she is. He didn’t recount every blessing she listed, but I suspect there are as many for what the Lord did in her life as He did for Christopher’s.*