

Let us pray: *Father God, faithfully waiting for us, graciously running to meet us, whom we have come to know in Jesus Christ, we come now to hear the Word which you have spoken by your Son, so that from Him, we might know of our welcome, that with Him, we might make the journey to our true home, and that in Him, we might serve you in your house throughout eternity. Open now our ears and our hearts, for we pray in His name, and in the power of His Spirit, ever rejoicing in your glory, O compassionate Father. Speak O Lord, for your servants are listening. Amen.*¹

I'm preaching this sermon in hope, and I pray that it gives you hope. We've been trying to understand prodigals for several months now, and as far as I know, we've seen very little change in our prodigals, if any. Some of you have been waiting months, some of you years, and some even decades, and you've learned over that time that you can't save your prodigal. You can't do it. And it's tempting in that situation to lose heart and to lose hope. It's hard to keep praying with fervency and conviction. It's hard to keep fighting off bitterness and resentment towards them. It's hard to really believe that they might return someday. You hoped for that at the beginning, but you tried everything, and nothing has changed. You can't save your prodigal.

That's a humbling truth for us, and it would lead to hopelessness if it weren't for another truth, the truth that God **saves** prodigals. God is in the business of finding the lost and raising the dead, and even when prodigals seem deaf to our words and dead to our love, God is at work to bring prodigals back to their senses, and ultimately, back home.

That's one of the reasons why Jesus told the parable of the prodigal son – to give hope to the hopeless. Even though we can't make it happen, prodigals do come home. And so instead of giving us things to do in order to save prodigals, which is something only God can do, God gives us a parable that shows us what we can do after God does what only He can do. We can't save them, but we can welcome them home.

I'm not going to go through the whole parable – there's just too much. So we're *not* going to look at the repentance of the Prodigal Son, or the bitterness of the Older Brother. We're looking at *the welcome that the prodigal received from his father*. We're looking to the father to learn how to answer the question **how do we welcome prodigals home?** What's the right response? How should we receive them? How can we prepare our hearts *now* to be ready for that day in the future? When that day comes, what should we do?

The answer that God gives is that we should *celebrate and be glad*. Celebrate and be glad! God's worked a miracle: He's brought the dead back to life! When that happens, all other questions fade into the background, and some of them *disappear*. Yes, we should make sure that they really are repentant, yes we should lead them to make restitution and clean up the mess they made, yes we should do all sorts of things.

¹ Adapted from Hughes Old, *Leading in Prayer*, Invocation 23, pg. 40.

But the heart and soul of welcoming prodigals home, the big “E” on the eyechart, the one thing you *must* do, is ***celebrate and be glad***, praising God for finding the one who was lost. If you have to settle accounts at all, do it later, and make it what comes after joy, not a precondition for joy. Don’t be the kind of waiter who hands the bill for the wedding reception to the bride while the rice is coming down. Don’t make your child do the dishes after their own birthday party. Maybe that other stuff matters; maybe it doesn’t, but it certainly doesn’t matter *right now*! All that matters now is that your dead prodigal has been raised to life! Rejoice and be glad!

But here’s the tricky part: how do you prepare for the party when the prodigal isn’t home yet? How can you *become* the kind of person who responds like the father, and not like the older brother? Here comes the prodigal, walking up the driveway; you don’t have time to work through years of grief and pain and frustration before they get here. If you don’t decide *now* how you’re going to respond, if you aren’t practicing grace and forgiveness right now, then you won’t be ready. And so *today*, even before we have the first clue that our prodigal might be coming home, let’s go ahead and plan the celebration. Here’s what we’re going to do.

Look with me at verses 20-24. In these verses, the father does eight things to welcome the prodigal son home. Eight things for us to prepare for, all flowing out of the conviction that we see in verse 32: “it is fitting (good, right) to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.” And here’s what that involves:

First, from verse 20: ***look for your prodigal***. The Father saw his son from a long way off, which usually happens because your looking. Looking for a prodigal means maintaining hope in their return, hope based on the kindness and love of God. When you forget the kindness and love of God, you become hopeless. When you become hopeless, you give up on your prodigal. When you give up on your prodigal, you stop looking for them to come home. But love hopes all things, not as a matter of wishful thinking, but as an overflow of God’s love towards you. As long as God is a loving God, keep looking for your prodigal’s return.

Second, also from verse 20, ***feel compassion for your prodigal***. This will help you battle the temptation to be bitter against them because of the pain their sin has brought into your life. A prodigal is both a sinner and a sufferer. Even when their suffering is the direct result of their sinful choices, if you love them, you will have compassion on them when you see them suffering. Practice compassion in your prayers now by considering their suffering, so that when you see them coming home, you will show them compassion in your response.

Third, verse 20 again, ***run to your prodigal***. How different this story would be if the father stood proudly at the door of his home, staring at his son the whole way up the driveway! Instead of a running welcome, it becomes a walk of shame. Even if the father lets him through the door at the end, that’s not *welcome*, that’s *tolerance*.

And the good news of the gospel is that God doesn't "tolerate" us coming home, He *wants* us to come home, and so He *welcomes* us home. The lesson for us is to treat prodigals the same way. And very practically, running toward your prodigal can take the form of a card, an email, a phone call, just to communicate the message: "I love you. I miss you. I want you to come home." You've already told them about sin and repentance at other times, so leave those topics out for now. Don't muddle *this* message. It's enough just to take the first step towards them, and this is all you need to say: "I love you. I miss you. I want you to come home."

Fourth, the last action in verse 20: when your prodigal comes home, ***embrace and kiss your prodigal***. Display obvious affection for them. Don't be hesitant, don't be stand-offish. Now is not the time for subtle nods and somber faces. Now is the time for over-the-top embarrassing love to be shown in such a way that it can't possibly be misunderstood. Skip the handshake and go straight in for the hug. Don't be silent; this is the time for joyful shouts and happy sighs. No matter what comes next, make sure that they know that they are loved.

What comes next in verse 21 is *repentance*, and ***welcoming a prodigal home means receiving their repentance***. Don't brush them off, don't downplay the reality of their sin, don't say it's no big deal. It's the biggest deal in the world, so take it seriously, and allow them to unburden themselves to you.

In this story, the boundaries and broken fellowship were so clear and obvious that the prodigal's repentance was obvious, even before he opened his mouth. But the father still listened and received his son's humble and heartbroken confession. The key parts of this true repentance were an acknowledgement of both the vertical and the horizontal nature of the prodigal's sin (sinned against heaven and before you), and his willing acceptance of the consequences (no longer worthy). The father blesses his son by accepting this description as real and true, but *welcoming him anyway*.

What happens next in v.22 is *incredible* grace, made all the more incredible by the fact that they both just agreed about how bad things were. Refusing to downplay sin means magnifying grace. And in the father's magnificent grace, by giving his son a robe and a ring and shoes, he is restoring the prodigal's place in the family.

That's the sixth lesson: ***welcoming prodigals home means restoring their place***. The father refuses to leave the prodigal son in the place of a servant, and he restores him to the place of *son*. Now, this restoration is not the same thing as erasing the past – in this case, he's restored to his place as son, but he still has no inheritance (v.31). There are consequences, in some cases maybe more or less severe than we see here. But the big idea is that he is not forever treated as *persona non grata*, a second class citizen. He's not constantly reminded of his sin by being identified and treated as a sinner. Forgiveness restores dignity and humanity to sinners, so they have the right to be called children of God.

Seventh, from verse 23 – **welcoming prodigals home means preparing for the feast**. It takes a while to fatten a calf. This particular calf may not have been fattened with this feast in mind, but the point is that the father was prepared to celebrate with extravagant joy. He was *ready* for this, he'd been waiting for this for a long time, and it showed. He hadn't simply been sitting around stewing over his son; he lived in such a way that he could drop everything and throw a massive party the moment his son came back.

I'm not talking about holding your breath and maintaining unrealistic expectations about a quick fix. But I am talking about not being caught by surprise when God does one of His favorite things. God loves to restore sinners, and if we are surprised by that, it just means that we don't know God! But you *do* know God, you know that He loves you, and you know that He loves your prodigal even more than you do. Since this is the case, how can you show that you have faith that God will bring your prodigal back? You may not be able to *schedule* the party right now, but you sure can go ahead and *plan* it.

Go ahead and decide now that you will have a party. It's amazing how far that decision will go in battling bitterness, softening your heart, and giving you hope for your prodigal. On the other hand, if you can't commit to celebrating their return now, that's a clue that something has gone wrong in your heart. So make that decision now, and start asking questions: What would you need to have to be able to show special love to your prodigal? What would they like to eat and drink, what music would they want, who would they want to be present? Something as simple as making these preparations will do wonders both to communicate love to them *when they return*, but also to soften your heart towards them even now.

The eighth action also comes from verse 23: **welcome prodigals home by eating and celebrating**. God's picture of welcome is not payback or doing penance. It's not a long sober conversations in the living room. It's not a gradual process of slowly winning your way back into favor. It's not a picture of longstanding arguments resolved and accounts settled. God says that welcome looks like a *feast*, like a *party*, like a *celebration*.

Do you ever wonder why we have the Lord's Supper every week? Here's why: whenever sinners enter God's presence and find welcome through Jesus Christ, it *always* ends in a feast! And what you learn here in God's house is what you should take home and make a part of your house, too: God's picture of *broken fellowship gloriously restored* is a joyful feast. When a prodigal comes home, eat, drink, and be merry!

All of these different actions flow out of this fundamental conviction found in v.24 and repeated in v. 32 – **it is fitting to celebrate and be glad when God raises dead prodigals to life**. Because God Himself rejoices in repentance, we should rejoice, too. We are called to mark the prodigal's *restoration* by way of *celebration*.

Honestly, I can't think of a better example than the one we heard about on Wednesday night: every year on the anniversary of his return to Christ, the gentleman whose testimony we heard gathers friends, family, everyone who will listen, for a meal where he retells the story of God's grace in calling him back home. That's exactly right. Welcoming prodigals home means celebrating the grace of God, and that celebration will never end. *Once* your prodigal was dead, but *now* they are alive; once they were lost, but now they are found. So hear these hope-giving words from your God, and prepare your hearts to celebrate and be glad.

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*

Let us pray: *"Almighty, merciful, and most gracious God and Father, we earnestly implore you to turn the hearts of all who have forsaken the faith once delivered to your Church, those who have wandered from it or are in doubt or temptation through the corruption of your truth; mercifully visit them and turn them again, so that with undivided hearts they may take pleasure in your Word and be made wise to salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, our Lord, and Amen."*