



# Central Peninsula Church

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## The Running Father & His Two Lost Sons, Part 1

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Good morning. It's good to be here. I feel humbled and honored to be here at CPC, to be here behind this pulpit. I feel humbled and honored because you are so well served here in this pulpit. You are a congregation that is well fed by very good preachers. So, while my task this morning is to preach, to feed you with God's Word, I have a hunch that because you're accustomed to such great teaching here, my main ministry this morning may simply be to help make Mark Mitchell and your other CPC preachers look really good. Depending on how I do this morning, I may be able to make these guys look really, really good—better than they've ever looked to you before!

I'm a young guy. I have a lot to learn as a preacher. So on my first Sunday up here let me just ask that whenever you see me up here you pray for me. Pray for me because I need it. Pray that over the weeks and months and years the Lord would grow and mature me as a preacher. So, one of the ways I'm going to help make these other guys look even better is this: you've just finished nearly two years of studying the gospel of Luke. And now, for my first two sermons, guess which book of the Bible I'm preaching out of? Right—Luke. I can see that some of you are beginning to pray for me right now! This is intentional. I'm preaching out of Luke because in my first sermons here I want to preach a text that has meant a lot to me and my sense of what the Christian life and what Christian ministry is all about. So as I preach this morning my main hope is that you get to know Jesus better, but I'm also hoping that through this text, which I treasure so much, you'll get to know me and my heart as a pastor a bit better.

How many of you lived here in the Bay Area during the '89 earthquake? I was 11 years old when that earthquake hit. And on that afternoon I was over 100 miles away from the Bay Area, playing in my backyard in Sacramento, when all of the sudden massive waves began to surge in our swimming pool. In a matter of seconds our pool was emptied of most of its water. My mom was standing nearby and I remember her first thought was that Hondo had fallen into the pool. Hondo was our horse. But we looked and Hondo wasn't in the pool, he was in the field eating hay. We soon learned what had happened. We learned that the entire Bay Area had been shaken by an earthquake. We learned

that this giant earthquake sprang from one little epicenter way up in the Santa Cruz Mountains. From this one epicenter, a Sacramento swimming pool was shaken and the entire Bay Area landscape was forever changed. For the next two weeks we are exploring what has been for me the epicenter of the Bible: Luke 15. This chapter, specifically the third and final parable in this chapter, has shaken me up and shaped me up like no other part of Scripture has. On the biblical richter scale, there's a whole lotta shakin' going on in this chapter.

Here in Luke 15 we have the most famous, and probably the most often misunderstood, of Jesus' parables. It's commonly called: "The Parable of the Prodigal Son," but as you've been taught before, this story is not about a single sinful son. No. This parable exposes two lost sons who, in their two different ways, are both estranged from their father. And the main character of this text, the hero of this parable, is the father. This is a story that's not primarily about who is lost, but whose is lost. So I call this: "The Parable of The Running Father & His Two Lost Sons." To feel the full force of this parable we need to keep in mind that Jesus delivered this parable in a 1st century, Middle Eastern, Jewish culture, and not in our 21st century, American, Silicon Valley, nonfat latte culture. This parable warms the hearts of people from all cultures, but when we hear this parable in its original cultural context, it really comes to life.

When we interact with people of our same culture and background, what everybody knows is not explained. So for example, when I was in Cambodia recently and a grown man my age came alongside me, grabbed my hand, and began holding it for an extended period of time, I freaked out. I started thinking, "What kind of a pastor's conference has Mark Mitchell brought me to?" But everybody in that Cambodian culture knew that this extended session of male hand holding was simply a gesture of friendship. I didn't know that. It meant something else to me. I had to have the meaning behind this action explained to me. The same thing goes for this parable. We need to understand and have explained the cultural world that's behind it.

So let's dive right in. We're looking at Luke 15 verses 1-3, which set the historical context of our passage, and then skipping over the parable of the

Searching Shepherd and the Diligent Woman, we'll focus in on the third, climactic parable of the bunch in verses 11-32. This week I'll read the entire parable, but I won't preach on the second half of the parable until next week. I'll be reciting from the ESV, the English Standard Version.

**“Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, ‘This man receives sinners and eats with them. So he told them this parable:…And he said, ‘There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.’ And he divided his property between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.’” And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’” But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’” And they began to celebrate. Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’” But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never**

**disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!” And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found’”**  
(Luke 1–3, 11–32).

### **I. Luke 15:1–3**

This chapter begins with a scandal. Tax collectors and “sinners” are gathering to be with Jesus. They’re flocking to Jesus. And Jesus is okay with this. In fact, Jesus desires this—he gladly receives these tax collectors and sinners. Jesus welcomes these people who were viewed by the community as “immoral,” “unclean,” and “unwelcome.” The Pharisees and scribes are not pleased with Jesus’ behavior. Now, the Pharisees and scribes often get bad press in the Scriptures and because of this we often miss that these were people who really did want to preserve the honor of God’s law and God’s name. Their role was similar to that of modern day pastors. But these leaders get it wrong. In their attempt to zealously preserve God’s honor, they forget what God is really like. They champion human rules and regulations over God’s grace and glory. So in seeing the great rabbi Jesus spending time with these rule-breaking people, the Pharisees and scribes begin to think that Jesus is soft on sin. For Jesus is not only receiving sinners, he also eats with them! Jesus is always doing this kind of thing. Jesus is regularly feasting with the sinners of society. In 1st century Jewish culture, eating a meal with someone conveyed all sorts of loaded messages. You and I will eat tacos with strangers and not think much of it. But in Jesus’ day, to eat a meal with someone meant that you accepted and loved that person. Scandalously, Jesus is accepting and loving tax collectors and sinners. And so the religious leaders grumble. They think Jesus is being soft on sin. He is not. As always, Jesus influences the crowd rather than the crowd influencing Jesus.

This is the original audience of our parable. Jesus addresses this audience, not with a few propositional statements on why he does what he does, but with a story, with a parable that tells of a Father who goes after lost son number one (tax collector and sinner types) and lost son number two (Pharisee and scribe types).

## II. Luke 15:11–12

Verse 11 introduces these three major players: A father and his two sons. And the first conversation of the parable is of the younger son demanding his inheritance, his “share of the property,” from his father. Jewish law stated that when a father neared his death, he was to make preparations to give a double portion of his wealth to his eldest son (Deuteronomy 21). This father had two sons and so 2/3rds of his wealth would eventually go to his eldest son, and 1/3rd of the wealth would go to his younger son.

Now by demanding his inheritance from his healthy father, this son is saying that he wants his dad dead! He wants his dad dead so that he can have his dad’s stuff and run his own life. Kenneth Bailey is a missionary who spent 40 years of his life living in the Middle East in rural villages that, 2,000 years later, remain quite similar to the Middle Eastern village culture of Jesus’ day. Kenneth tells of how he often spent time talking to these villagers about this parable and how he would regularly ask them two questions: 1. Has anyone in your village ever heard of a son asking his father for his inheritance? Answer: “No! Of course not! Never!” 2. Say a son did ask his father for such a thing, what would his father do? Answer: “His father would beat him of course!”

When I taught this parable in Cambodia, a place much more similar to 1st century Judea than America, I also asked a group of pastors these same two questions. And what I found out was that if a son ever did such an outrageous thing in Cambodia he would be immediately punished and then disowned by his father. One pastor told me that if the son was from a wealthy family the father would likely publish an article in the local newspaper announcing to the community: “This guy is no longer my son. He is no longer a member of my family. I am not to be held responsible for his actions. I am no longer his father.”

This father is different. This father does something unheard of, something personally humiliating. He goes ahead and divides up his property, his very “living,” for his younger son. 1st century Middle Eastern patriarchs did not do this for rebellious sons. Now, the whole village will look in shame on this father for not beating his son, but instead granting his request. Unlike other fathers, this father is willing to suffer a broken heart.

## III. Luke 15:13–19

Quickly the younger son gets out of town. It’s been a few days and by now the entire village has heard the news of what this younger son has done and about all the shame his father has taken on. The village is angry. So the son quickly sells off his portion of the family estate. He turns his inheritance into cash and journeys off to a far

country. He leaves Jewish territory behind after having, in a few days, liquidated generations worth of his family’s assets. And there, in the far country, the son wastes his wealth in “reckless living.” Now, what exactly did this son do in the far country? We don’t know exactly. Later his tattletale elder brother will report that he spent his fortune on prostitutes. But it’s unclear whether the elder brother, who has yet to speak with his sibling, is just making an accusation or whether he in fact understands all too well what his brother would’ve been doing with that rebellious heart and all that money so far from home. I tend to think the elder brother is right on this one: that the son was wasting away his life with prostitutes and, fill in the blank, doing all the other damaging things people do when they flee far from home in order to run their own life. Whatever his behavior was like, at the heart of the matter is this: out in the far country, the son has a broken relationship with the father.

Through this parable Jesus is showing us, defining for us, what sin is. And notice that Jesus is not soft on sin. Notice that he has a far deeper understanding of sin than the religious leaders do. Sin is wanting God dead and fleeing to a far country where you can run your own life. At the heart of sin isn’t breaking rules, but breaking a relationship. Actually, by the end of this parable Jesus goes even further than this by showing that even the one who tried to keep all the rules, the elder son, even he has a broken relationship with the father. In this parable both sons are estranged from their father. Both the “bad” son and the “good” son are lost. Both are prodigals.

We often think that there are just two ways to live: either God’s way or our way. That’s true, but not true enough. It’s more nuanced than that. I’m indebted to a pastor in New York City who points out that this parable teaches that there aren’t two ways to live, but three. Make sure you get this. There are three ways to live. Jesus is saying that one way people live their lives is the first way: the younger son, relativistic, irreligious, breaking all the rules way of living. But this way, as we shall see, ends only in famine. The second way to live is the elder son way: the moralistic, religious, keeping all the rules way of living (which we’ll look at closely next week). This is also a failed way of living life and connecting with God. You’re alienated from the Father if you’re on either of these two paths. Sin, Jesus says, is wanting God dead so that you can be god over your own life, either through breaking the rules or through keeping the rules. So both “bad behavior” people and “good

behavior” people can be deep in sin, it just looks a little different. In this parable, both the bad people and the good people are lost and need to be found. Both need a third way of living: the way of the Running Father, the way of the gospel. Which way are you living?

After the younger son spends all his cash, a famine strikes and he begins to be in need. But at this point the son won't even consider going home. The shame is too great. At home he would have to face an angry village, a self-righteous older brother, and... his father. How would you treat your son if he wasted away a third of your wealth? So, the Jewish son gets a very un-Jewish job, feeding pigs for a Gentile. 1st century Jews did not go near pigs. Leviticus 11:7 says, simply, “the pig is unclean to you.” This son who has broken relationship with his father has also broken all the rules. You cannot get more unclean than this guy was. Life does not go well for the son in the far country. And so, finally, the son decides to return home. Now it's often thought that here, verse 17, that the son is repenting. I don't think that's quite what's going on. It seems that here the son is merely recognizing that he's not doing too well and that he better hurry up, fix his situation and get some food.

In that culture the only way this son could re-enter his community and his father's house was by paying back his father all the money he had lost. So here in the far country this first prodigal devises a game plan for how he can earn his way back into good standing with his father and get a little bread to eat instead of pig slop. So he comes up with a nice sounding, 2-part speech. First part: “Father I've sinned and I'm not worthy to be your son.” Second part: “Let me be a servant and make it up to you.” Many of us have given this kind of speech before. We're not really repenting; we're just trying to clean up our situation a little bit. The second part of the son's speech shows that his game plan is to come home and work as a servant rather than be loved as a son. He still thinks the problem is the money he lost, but really, it's that he is lost.

#### IV. Luke 15:20–21

The son heads home. A penniless, pig-smelling, famine-stricken son heads home. Have you seen pictures of people who've been through a famine? The sight isn't pretty. The son heads home and the original audience, the tax collectors, sinners, Pharisees, and scribes are eager to hear what happens next: How badly will the villagers beat this prodigal son? How many of them will spit in his face? When the battered son finally reaches his father's house, will his father curse at him or just beat him right away? Now the climax. The epicenter of the epicenter. Jesus breaks all the bounds of ancient patriarchal culture to present a picture of a radically different kind of father. Verse 20, look at the 5 verbs, the 5 actions attributed to this father.

**1. First verb.** While his son was still a long way off, the text says the father **saw** his son. This father was diligently searching for his lost son. Any other Middle Eastern patriarch would have long since forgotten and disowned his son. Not this father! He sees his son far far off at the edge of the village, at the edge of a village full of people eager to punish this prodigal who's squandered the family's wealth and the village name. Do you know that the Father sees you? No matter how far off you may be, he has not forgotten you. Nor has he forgotten your prodigal loved ones who are off wandering in a far country.

**2. Second verb.** The father **felt compassion**. The word translated as “compassion” here is from the Greek word *splagchna*. It's the word for your guts, your stomach insides, the place where you feel the deepest emotions. This father is ripped up inside over his son.

**3. Third verb.** This father **ran** to his son. 1st century Middle Eastern men did not run. Children ran, even mothers might run, but grown men, fathers—never. One scholar writes, “In the Middle East a man of his age and position always walks in a slow, dignified fashion. It is safe to assume that he has not run anywhere for any purpose for 40 years. No villager over the age of 25 ever runs. But now the father races down the road. To do so, he must take the front edge of his robes in his hand like a teenager. When he does this, his legs show in what is considered a humiliating posture. All of this is painfully shameful for him. The loiterers in the street will be distracted from tormenting the prodigal and will instead run after the father, amazed at seeing this respected village elder shaming himself publicly.” In that day, there was no such thing as a Running Father.

But this father sees his son far off and he knows what his son will face as he enters the village. The village elders will be quick to pounce on the rebellious son, and so this father runs to meet his son, he sprints in order to head off what will happen at the village edge. For everything the angry villagers wish to do to the sinful son, they now have to do to the father. The father runs to take on his son's shame and punishment. There is a shame-shift, a suffering-shift in this verse. There is a cost and there is a cross in this parable. Contrary to the suspicion of the Pharisees and the elder brother, Jesus is not soft on sin. No, he sees that sin runs so deep in the human heart that we can't save ourselves from it. We need a savior. And in this action of the Father we once again see that grace is free for us, but so costly for God. God suffers to seek and save lost sons and daughters. All other religions

give you a god who sits on the porch, waiting for his subjects to suffer through the village, exert great moral or spiritual effort, and work their way to him. Only Christianity gives you a God who sees that you are lost and comes racing off the porch to suffer in your place. Do you hear it? Do you hear the Father's footsteps as he runs to you?

**4. Fourth verb.** The father **embraced** his son. He throws his fatherly arms around his filthy son.

**5. Fifth verb.** The father **kissed** him. What an image! This was not the reception the son was anticipating. Once upon a time a beautiful princess kissed a frog, turning that frog into a handsome prince. Even better than the famous fairytale kiss is the Father's kiss. The best fairytale of all is true: the father's kiss has turned a sinner into a son. Do you know that you are this valuable to your Heavenly Father? When you are lost, he goes searching for you. The God of the Universe, who can flick stars with his fingers, runs to kiss you. We waste so much time seeking value and approval from the world, we run after nicer cars, more money, bigger houses, slimmer bodies, more degrees and trophies, a better sermon performance; whatever it is, just hoping we will feel better about ourselves. Don't do this. Don't waste your time. Instead, understand that your Heavenly Father has gone to great lengths to find you! And when I say you are "this valuable" to your father I don't want you to gain a great idea and image of yourself. I want you to gain a great idea and image of your father. Biblical self esteem isn't me-centered, it's Father-centered. This parable isn't meant so much to grow our self esteem, it's meant to grow our God-esteem.

What a Father we have! Do you see that God is this kind of a father? All of us have a default image in our minds of what our Heavenly Father is like. It pops up in our minds just as naturally as the desktop image on our computer screen. You may have had an earthly father who, because of his absence in your life, or his abuse, or his promise breaking, or his harshness, or a thousand other evils, makes it very very hard for you to think of God as your father. This morning, I am asking you to see that your Heavenly Father is not like that. He's not. He's like this. You can trust this father! His embrace is secure and his kiss is pure. We've got to rethink our default image of the Father in light of Luke chapter 15. Men and women, have you been embraced by this Father? Have you felt the Father's kiss? Until you have, until you know that kind of transformation in your heart, you'll be stuck in either younger son or elder son living. Only those who have experienced the Father's kiss live truly transformed, truly Christian lives.

The father's kiss enables the son's confession. Grace always precedes repentance! And so the son

begins the speech he'd rehearsed back in the far country. But notice, now the speech is different. What had made sense back in the far country does not make sense in the father's arms. His 2-point speech has become a 1-point speech. His speech has collapsed into a confession. The son ditches the second part of his speech and simply confesses his sin. He's been found by the father. He now understands that he can't become a servant and earn back his father's favor. No, the father has taken care of all that. And that's the lesson elder brother types have a very hard time learning. That's the lesson I've had a hard time learning.

Question. Was this son embraced by his father because he had cleaned himself up and had something to offer the father? No! This prodigal was bankrupt and filthy—the whole village could see that the father embraced his son while he was still in filthy rags! And if you're a Christian here this morning, your conversion happened the same way. You didn't become a Christian because you cleaned yourself up and sought God. You became a Christian because, one way or another, God sought you and he began to clean you up. True repentance is embracing the fact that the father has suffered in order to embrace you while you were still lost in your sin. What does Romans 5:8 say? "**...but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.**" That's the gospel! That's the good news! We ought to so enjoy and cherish this good news that we can't help but run out of these doors, out into our villages, to welcome prodigals home, just like the father welcomed us home.

## **V. Luke 15:22–24**

Finally notice that the father doesn't stop extending grace. He gives his son gifts that take care of his son's needs. Immediately, he clothes his ragged son in his best robe. This is what God is like. Back in the 3rd chapter of our Bibles, back in the garden of Eden, Adam and Eve sinned and were ashamed and naked. And what did God do? He made garments for them and clothed them. There was grace in the garden and there's grace in the gifts of the Father. Clothed in his father's best robe and wearing his father's ring, now the whole village will identify this son as one who has been accepted back into the father's family. The father also puts shoes on his son's sin-sore feet. In that day, slaves went barefoot. Only sons and daughters wore shoes.

And then the father has the fattened calf killed. The fattened calf would have been the most precious, most expensive animal this family had.

Fattened calves were killed and eaten only on very special occasions. You could feed at least 75 people with this thing. So, in killing this calf, the father calls for a village-wide party in honor of the day's events. The father knows his son had gotten acquainted with a type of partying back in the far country. The type that does not satisfy. The type that ends only in famine. The Father wants to show his son, wants to show the whole village, that only in his house is there true, deeply satisfying, eternal partying. The occasion for the party, verse 24: **“for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.”** Did this dead son make himself come alive? No. Did this lost son find himself? No. As in the two parables before this one where the good shepherd found the lost sheep and the diligent woman found the lost coin, here The Running Father found his son. He did the finding. And that calls for a party!

So, to the Christians in this room, I have one question: are you partying? If not, see that we serve a God who throws parties because he has saved prodigal sons and daughters like you and me. We Christians ought to be the best partyers around. We ought to be people who party, who celebrate the Father, who love to be together, invite people over, and make merry in honor of what the Father has done. That's what we'll be doing for eternity in heaven. So, that's your homework this week. Spend some time practicing for heaven by partying.

And to all the prodigals in this room, all of you younger-son-types who are right now doing who knows what in the far country: join this party. Come home. No matter how it is going for you in the far country right now, someday a famine will come. So come home. Confess your lostness. Like a scandalous Middle Eastern father who has come running out of his house to embrace his lost son—Jesus has come running out of heaven to embrace you, his arms stretched out wide on the cross.

You are a sinner. You need to be saved. Instead of pouring out his righteous wrath upon you, God the Father has poured out his wrath upon his son Jesus. Jesus bore your sins on the cross so that the Father might greet you with a kiss. Receive this kiss and confess your sin. Older brother types may have told you that you need to measure up first, that you've got to pay back your debts and clean yourself up before you can come home. It's not true! Come home and the Father will feast with you this very afternoon.

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