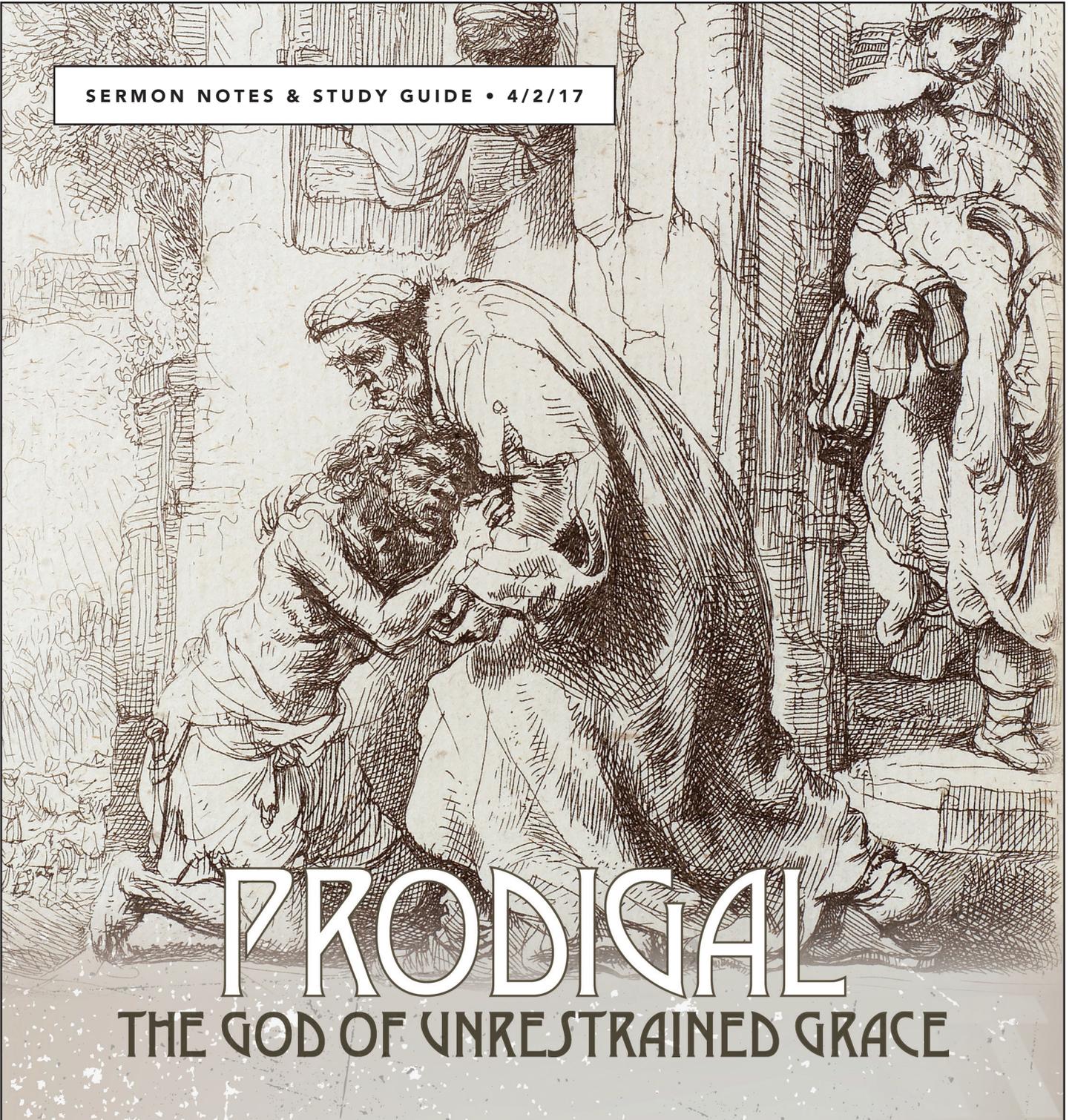


SERMON NOTES & STUDY GUIDE • 4/2/17



PRODIGAL

THE GOD OF UNRESTRAINED GRACE

Our new Lenten Series, **Prodigal: The God of Unrestrained Grace**, centers on the Parable of the Prodigal Son, found in Luke 15. The series will carry us throughout the Lenten season, including Easter Sunday, as we look at this parable and its themes of grace and forgiveness. The series dovetails with our Lenten Art Exhibition, "A Father & His Two Sons: The Art of Forgiveness," which includes 43 pieces by artists including Rembrandt, J.J. Tissot, and Thomas Hart Benton that were inspired by the Parable of the Prodigal Son. We encourage you to visit the exhibition and meditate on this powerful parable as we consider the story from the perspective of the father and both of his sons.

INVITED TO GRACE • Luke 15:31-32 • Dan Jessup • April 2, 2017

Our scripture lesson this morning comes out of Luke. It picks up at the end of the gospel where we've heard about the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin and now we are wrapping up the parable of the lost or prodigal son. Our scripture is quite short because it has to do with the dialogue of the dad to the oldest son. The oldest son was quite indignant, angry and disappointed that the father had welcomed the younger son back. Here's what the father says to his oldest son in verse 31. "'My son,' the father said, '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 and is found.'"

As many of you know, I grew up in southern California. It was a nice place to grow up in the late 1960's and early 70's. I remember that we lived in this really huge house. However, when I go back to look at it, I see that it's only 1300 sq. ft., but when I was a kid it was a big house. And what I remember as a big yard was really a small yard. It had a chain link fence with a gate behind the yard. I used to ride my Kawasaki 120 motorcycle out that gate to the service road behind our house to get to a nearby creek. That creek didn't turn out to be so good in my life. During a torrential downpour my buddy and I would go to the garage and get our Styrofoam surf boards and ride down the swollen creek. We didn't realize that people die all over the world that way. I have fond memories of the movie theater in our town. In fact, that's where I took my bride on our very first date. I also remember playing out in the field and my dad would stand on our concrete porch and whistle. I'm not a whistler, but he would put his fingers in his mouth and give this great whistle and I knew it was time to come home. That's enough about my childhood.

We've been studying the parables. The parables are a unique style meant to mess with your mind. They are meant to crawl into your heart. They are meant to compel you to Jesus. They are not meant so much to instruct you as they are meant to turn the brain on, engage the heart and compel us to a different way of thinking, a different way of acting, a different way of believing. They say a picture paints a thousand words. If so, a parable paints 10,000 words. You don't have to memorize a parable, because once you hear it, it's planted in your soul forever.

We are studying one of the most beautiful parables ever spoken by our Master – the prodigal son, or better yet, the prodigal sons. We heard about the younger son, the rebellious one. The one maybe like you, certainly like me when I was a child, who tells the father I don't want to live under your roof. I don't care if you're alive anymore. I don't want to be part of this family. I wish you were dead; would you give me my share of the inheritance? Make no mistake – this dad is different than me as a dad. I would have told my son to get lost. But the prodigal son's dad didn't do that. He divided his wealth. The son goes off and squanders his wealth and comes back in a beautiful story of redemption. Last week Tim did a glorious job of preaching about the older son. That son did it all right in life and yet

became a curmudgeon. This morning we are going to take a look at the father. It's pretty clear from this scripture that the prodigal son's father was representative of our Heavenly Father. We get a beautiful picture of the characteristics and nature of our Heavenly Father. All of us have earthly fathers at some point. Some of them may be alive; some of them may not. Your dad may be helpful in painting a picture; some of them may not be all that helpful. This morning I would like you to set your earthly father aside for a second and see if God will give us a new marvelous picture of who our Heavenly Father really is. We see one thing about our Heavenly Father. We learn that He is relentless in the pursuit of His children. He will not quit until every single one of His children come home. How many of you have seen the movie Hacksaw Ridge? It's fantastic true story. Desmond Doss is a Seventh-day Adventist, a young soldier who gets in the military and will not carry a weapon. The story unfolds beautifully about some of the complexity of that scenario. He wants to be a medic; he wants to help people. He finally gets deployed into the Pacific theater and is part of the invasion of Okinawa. That island is 300 miles south of Japan and very strategic. In order to invade the island our troops had to scale a 300 foot embankment on these nettings. As the story goes, Desmond climbs up and sees a mine field with dying and wounded American soldiers. The Japanese soldiers were waiting to attack our troops as they arrived. Desmond, without a weapon, is there and his job is to get the wounded, take them over to the edge and lower them back down. It's an unbelievable story of man after man after man that Desmond runs out to pick up with bullets flying and mortars all over the place. He would carry them back on his shoulders put them on the ground amidst gun fire. He put a rope around them, lowered them down the 300 foot embankment and then turned around to go back for more. They interviewed Desmond about his activity and he said this: "So I just kept praying, Lord please help me get more and more or just one more until there was no one left and I'm the last one down." It's a beautiful picture of our Heavenly Father. He will not quit until every one of His children come home. Have you ever noticed that it is seldom that people get argued into the Kingdom of God? I think they get compelled into it. We see a picture of a loving God, and know it's so wonderful to be loved. We see a picture of a loving Savior Jesus and get compelled to move in. Here we are getting a picture of the Heavenly Father who is so compelling because of His love. And in order for it to be divine love, it's defined by grace. We are familiar with the term grace as unmerited favor – receiving not what we deserve but something we don't deserve, because of the kindness of the one giving grace. Many would say wait a minute, I'm all for grace but Jesus came in grace and truth. Correct?

Isn't there going to be a judgment one day? Absolutely. Here's my picture of how that's going to go. Dan's in Peru at Machu Picchu and gets run over by a llama. Now I'm standing before the eternal judge and he's in his dark robe and the bailiff reads my charges of what I did in my life. And then the judge is going to say, "What do you plead?"

I'm going say "Um... guilty, on every single one." Then the judge is going to say, "What do you have to say for yourself?" I'll say this, "Jesus, I plead the blood of Jesus." And the judge will smile and say "well said" and "well done and welcome home." Grace is when we don't get what we deserve. We deserve something other than what our Father wants to give us. He's the God of grace and unmerited favor. Chris Tomlin was right when he said, "you're a good, good Father, it's who you are, it's who you are, it's who you are and I am loved by you. It's who I am, it's who I am, it's who I am." I think we often mistakenly think that grace showed up when Jesus came to earth in the incarnation. We think somehow grace came just when Jesus went to the cross and was resurrected. But the apostle Paul said to his young ministry son, Timothy, "that's actually not true Timothy." And he writes this in 2 Timothy 1:9-10, "He has saved us and called us to a holy life – not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, and has now been revealed through the appearance of a Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel." Grace is the nature of the love of God. There is no divine love without being consumed with grace. In 1 Corinthians 13 we find the beautiful passage on love which is often read at weddings. We want that love and know so well that marriages are going to do their best to try to get at that type of love, but it will never come to fruition until we encounter our Heavenly Father. He is a God of grace, with whom unmerited favor abounds. I think of the good, good Father's unrelenting love, this overflowing generosity, this amazing grace.

Our God is a God of love and divine grace, but He is also a God of celebration. The nature of the Kingdom is about celebration. I had a business engagement this last week in Stamford, Connecticut, where my wife and I did a Young Life banquet. Since we were flying into LaGuardia Airport we said, "Why don't we spend a couple of days in New York City? We've never done this before." We had a hotel right in mid-town New York and decided to see two Broadway plays. If you get the chance, see "The Lion King" – one of the most magnificent plays I've seen in my life. We also saw Carole King's life story called "Beautiful." It was just fantastic. We went to nearby Times Square. Seeing the lights and people, I couldn't help but thinking about New Year's Eve in Times Square. These New Yorkers know how to have a celebration.

I'm a Young Life guy. One of the best parts about Young Life camp is at the end of camp where so many kids who didn't have a relationship with Jesus have an opportunity to invite Jesus into their life. On the last night of camp there's a holy event where each one of those kids are asked to stand up and say that they accepted Jesus into their life. It's just fantastic – often 30, 40, 60% of the kids gave their lives to Christ. It's an unbelievable miracle that unfolds. When they are done and the prayer is said, they turn on the music and the entire club room erupts in this wild celebration of joy and laughter. The kids stand up that met Christ. The kids stand up that didn't meet Christ. The Young Life leaders

stand up. The work crew stands up. The Young Life staff, the property staff and the horses out in the corral stand up. And everybody has a glorious time of celebration. Yet I have to say that I'm not positive that the church in the west is known for its celebratory spirit. Is it? Sometimes I think the church is more like Augusta National with a very reserved "bravo, bravo." In Latin America they know how to celebrate; the Africans know how to celebrate. But I have to say, like Tim Keller, that too many of us are like the older brother, aren't we? Can we really celebrate people coming to Jesus when their life has been so pathetic? Maybe they come to Jesus and wander and come back. Tim Keller says it this way, "So many in the church are the older brother, unwilling to bend the knee. So right and yet so wrong." If I celebrate, I'm not condoning the behavior. I have to be honest with you. We are way too much like the older brother.

I wonder what keeps us from this wild, wonderful celebration of the work of God around the world. I think there are a couple of things. One, I think there's simply a spirit of judgment that we look at the younger brother like the older brother did and say, "Yeah, I actually think you are wrong." Maybe it's a spirit of resentment. I know a lot of families are torn apart by resentment and have a hard time celebrating because of something somebody in the family has done or celebrating the person because of the behavior. Maybe it's our doubt – maybe it just seems too easy to apply grace to a situation. Maybe it's anger or having tried it once and it didn't work; maybe it's fear. Ultimately, I believe all of these are some form of pride. Deep down in our soul we have pride. The church is full of the older brother. You may be sitting next to one or you might be one. I know I am at times. Nouwen says it this way, "there is so much resentment among the 'just' and the 'righteous.' There is so much judgment, condemnation, and prejudice among the 'saints.' There is so much frozen anger (I believe he put that in there for Presbyterians) among the people who are so concerned about avoiding 'sin.'" The older brother despises the younger brother. He despises his father's joy. It almost reminds me of the chapter right before it in Luke 14 where there is a big celebration feast and so many said I can't come, I'm busy, I bought some oxen, I bought a field or whatever. God is a celebratory spirit. Nouwen says it this way, "God's joy is the joy of his angels and his saints; it is the joy of all who belong to the Kingdom." I wonder how big our sanctuary would need to be if we got better at celebrating, because I believe that so many on the outside just don't see the celebratory spirit that we might actually feel on the inside, and would be compelled to come – love consumed by grace, spirit of celebration and then the need to come home. The older brother says to the father, "this son of yours has come home" and the father not only ran to the younger son, but I believe he left the party and ran to the older brother as well. Can you imagine the scene 200 yards from the party where the wine is flowing, the food is flowing, the guests are coming and the older brother is standing outside? The heart of the father is coming to him asking him to lay down his resentment. Yes, you have a right to have it, but look at what it is doing to you. Lay it down. Swallow it with grace and come rejoice with me because the Father, the King, the Kingdom is about coming home. People

always ask me, where's your favorite place to visit around the world? My home. Home – that's where I want to be. We sing about it don't we? "Sweet home Alabama"; I'll be home for Christmas; there's no place like home. What does it mean for you and me to come home? I've had lots of homes. Santa Barbara was home at one point, home on the east coast, home in Sacramento, home here – home is where you come and you don't have to perform anymore. You can bring your broken spirit, your tired and weary body and just sit. We also know that it doesn't fully exist this side of Heaven. It is what Heaven is going to be, but Heaven doesn't have to start after we are dead and run over by the llama. Heaven is meant to start now. I think of the homeless in our city, who have no home to come home to. Come home. It's sad to me that the younger brother was a long way off and yet his journey was much shorter than the other brother's journey home. Come home. Jesus said in John 14, "I go to prepare a place for you." He's preparing a place for us – a mansion. Here's the irony of the gospel, right? In order for there to be a home for you to go home to in Heaven, God the Heavenly Father had to send His eldest Son – better said, His only Son – out of the house to come into this world. Jesus "...did not consider equality with God something to grasp onto, but he emptied himself..." (Philippians 2:6) "...and moved into the neighborhood." (John 1:14) Jesus left to prepare a place for us so that we could come home. So where are you this morning? Are you home? When you come home, it's not a one-time thing you do. We're always coming home. We're always recognizing that we were home and then we left and we need to come back home. This is a daily experience of faith in our life. Jesus wants us to come home. I know that one day we're all going to get to see the Heavenly Father as He really is – in all His wonder, splendor, power, beauty and grace. We are going to be compelled to Him, and I believe many of us are going to look back and say "why didn't I run to Him the way He ran to me?" Life could have been so much sweeter. Why all the stress? Our Father is bidding us to come home. What's keeping you out in the cold? "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Corinthians 12:9) The grace of the Father is bidding us to come home. Can you hear the whistle? It's time to come home. Let's sing a song together, just one verse:

Amazing grace how sweet the sound
that saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost but now am found,
was blind but now I see.

Heavenly Father in the name of Jesus, we want to come home. Help us to lay down our pride. Help us to lay down our anger, our resentment, our judgment and pour into our life and those around us the grace and the love of our Heavenly Father. We need You and trust You and we pray these things in the name of Jesus. Amen.

STUDY GUIDE

"Prodigal: Invited to Grace"

Luke 15:31-32

Start It

- Parenting is a lot of work. Sometimes your kids behave, sometimes not. Sometimes you treat them exactly the same, sometimes not. The truth is, it is easy to be misunderstood as a parent of kids. Imagine being the dad of the younger and the older brother in the story of the Prodigal son. One son seems to irritate and one so compliant. Yet both need to be loved with a compelling, kind, firm, forgiving love.

Study It

- Think with me for a minute on why people have such a hard time giving grace to others who have done them wrong. There is in all of us a sense that we believe that the world should turn out the way we think it should turn out. And when it doesn't we get hurt, mad, sad, angry, resentful and bitter. Some people seem to embrace grace (unmerited favor) better than others and some people seem to give grace better than others.
- For you – as you think of the actions of the two brothers, which one do you most identify with? Why?
- If you were the father who went out to talk to the older brother what would you have said to him?
- Look at vs. 31 – what do you think it means when the father says "everything I have is yours?"
- Why is it so hard to celebrate God's grace given to others who you think don't deserve it?
- If you were better at embracing the unending grace of God, how do you think that would change your relationships with other people that are hard for you to get along with?

Pray It

Lord our God, I have to confess that I can be stingy giving grace. YES, even when I know that You have joyfully extended Your grace to me, I have a hard time lavishing the same grace on others. My pride gets in the way of treating others the way You treat me. Help me to more fully know Your grace and then to extend Your grace with joy and generosity.

Live It

Think of one person you have bitterness towards and to whom you think God would like you to extend grace. What is one step you could take this week to move towards that person in the grace of Jesus Christ?