

A Long Way off: A Very Happy Father's Day

Good morning!

Let me begin this morning by wishing all the fathers out there a very hardy and happy greeting on this very special day.

This is *your* day to be pampered and served, waited upon like a king, and given all your favorite treats, dinners, and gifts by your children who owe their very existence to you.

(And now it's time to wake up from that dream and get back to work being the guy who fixes stuff and takes care of the cars!) But seriously, it can be hard being a dad, changing gears from the pressures of providing and work to being a fun dad at home, right?

Listen to this story that hammers it home for me:

A man came home from work late again, tired, and irritated. He found his 5-year-old son waiting for him at the door. "Daddy, may I ask you a question?"

The dad mustering what little patience he had left replied: "Sure, what is it?"

"How much money do you make an hour?"

The dad lost it and blurted out, "That's none of your business! Why do you want to know?"

The little boy said, "I just want to know. Please tell me, how much do you make an hour?"

The dad, wanting to sit down and relax, said, "If you must know, I make \$20 an hour."

The little boy sighed and bowed his head. Looking up, he asked, "Daddy, can I borrow \$10 please?"

The father flew off the handle, "The only reason you want to know how much money I make is so that you can buy some stupid toy, so just march yourself straight to your room and go to bed. I don't have time for this."

The little boy quietly went to his room and shut the door. The dad sat down and started to get even madder about the nerve of his little boy.

After an hour or so, the man had calmed down, and started to think that maybe he was a bit hard on his boy. Maybe his son really needed the money for something important. And so, the father went up to his boy's room and opened it, "Are you asleep?"

"No daddy. I'm awake," replied the boy.

"I've been thinking, maybe I was too hard on you earlier. It's been a long day, and I took it out on you. Here's ten dollars."

The little boy sat straight up, beaming. "Oh, thank you, daddy!" he exclaimed. Then, reaching under his pillow, he pulled out a wad of crumpled up bills. The dad, seeing that the boy already had some money, started to get angry again. The little boy slowly counted out his money, and then looked up at his dad.

The dad, now ticked off, demanded to know what was going on, "Why did you want more money if you already had some?"

The little boy replied, "Because I didn't have enough, but now I do. Daddy, I have \$20 now...and I'd like to buy an hour of your time."

Sometimes we just forget to see the world through the simple eyes of a child and be fun. I know a guy who keeps a big jar of marbles on his bedroom dresser to remind him to be fun. Why you ask?

There are 940 marbles in that jar. Do you know why there are exactly 940 marbles? Because the time between the day your child is born and the day they turn 18, you've only got 940 Saturdays to spend with them. Don't lose your marbles like the father in this story.

Now today we're going to look at a father who did just that...he lost his son. Perhaps Jesus' best story ever, "*The Prodigal Son*," and we're going to see it in a very fresh and moving way...through a new film called *A Long Way off*.

Let's take a look at the trailer for it and then we'll get started in Luke 15:

[A Long Way Off Trailer](#)

A very intriguing way to see this ancient story freshly, isn't it? This movie brings it home, right on our modern-day doorstep.

Now let's look at the words of Jesus, and I want you to notice that he told three stories, culminating with "*The Prodigal Son*," but they all share the same point. If God makes a point three times in one sitting, there's a lesson He wants us to get. But what is it?

Three Stories...One Point

"Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.'

Then Jesus told them this parable: 'Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he **joyfully** puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' 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.

Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, '**Rejoice** with me; I have found my lost coin.' In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

Jesus continued: 'There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' So he got up and went to his father.

But while he was still **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.

The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

*'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 (Luke 15).'*''

Now as a father, on this very special day, you may think you are to see yourself in that role as the father, but you should not.

The role we all play in this story is the rebellious son. We have all behaved selfishly and taken what we think we are entitled to have, namely everything, and abused our freedom to indulge ourselves in everything we desire. This is the doctrine we call Free Will.

Free Will means that you have the right to choose your behavior. God did not make you a robot. You can choose to follow Him or choose to ignore Him. It is your option because He did not want automatons. He wanted us to choose to voluntarily respond to His love with our genuine love.

Of course, the risk and danger with Free Will is that many will not choose Him, and may even choose to be stupid and hurt each other. We call this the evening news. And eventually, of course, there is an accounting for our bad choices.

The problem with this gift of Free Will is that long ago we chose as a race to disobey God and were infected with a spiritual disease we call Sin. It is eventually fatal because God must be righteous and punish sin, and He cannot be in union with sin because He is holy.

This problem of our separation was solved at the cross when a perfect Man took that punishment for us, but we still have to choose to "come home."

With all of this in mind, let's look at a scene from *A Long Way off* where Jake exercises his free will.

Film Clip 11:15 to 17:07 (Jake's Take)

The one thing I want you to take away from this clip is not the actions of the son so much, but the father's. Jake has broken his father's heart. And yet, the father does not reveal it to Jake. He is crushed, but he let's his son choose to leave him.

Now I want you to ponder the point of these three stories, because there is a point Jesus is making. Do you see it? Have you figured it out yet? Before I give it away, let's look a little deeper at this masterpiece of a story.

The Background

Every good story has what we call “back-story,” the story that is not told to us but has a large bearing on the story nonetheless. There’s a lot going on here that is left unsaid because the Jews understood it all as part of their culture and their history, but we miss a lot that we don’t even realize is happening.

This society that we’ve been privy to through this story, an outlandish story to the people of this time and Middle Eastern culture because it would never happen like this, is one that is thick with a paradigm that we do not have in America in the 21st Century. It is a society steeped in honor, and conversely, shame.

The whole story is one of shame. The younger son had no right to ask for this inheritance. It was not his place to ask. We know that the firstborn son is the one at the top of the Jewish family order, right? And yet the younger son, just like Jake in *A Long Way Off*, asks for his inheritance. Whoa! This is out of line...BIG time!

Allowing it to all happen shames the father too. He should never have given in to this childish request. And the older brother would not have allowed it either, since he is supposed to protect the father and his eventual inherited estate, of which he just lost one-third, but he does nothing. Shame all around.

By the way, according to Deuteronomy 21:17, the Prodigal Son would have gotten one third of the estate. Can you imagine giving away 33% of your wealth, knowing it would be squandered foolishly? That would take a lot of faith on the father’s part to impart the lesson he hopes is learned by the Prodigal.

But who is Jesus’ lesson directed at in these three stories? Who is His audience?

The Audience

“Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

There are two groups here. The sinners (tax collectors) and the self-righteous (Pharisees).

You are in one of these two groups also. We all are.

You are either a sinner, someone like Jake, who realizes that you’ve shamed your father or you are self-righteous and think you’re not that bad, and as a matter of fact, you’re pretty good. At least not a murderer or rapist.

Obviously if you think your sins don't matter, and that you're good enough, you're a fool. Romans 3:10 says, *"there is no one righteous, not even one."* And in verse 23, *"for **all** have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."*

Look at James 2:10. *"For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just **one** point is guilty of breaking **all** of it."*

If a big, shiny red balloon represents God's holiness, how many pins do you need to stick in it to break it? We are **all** guilty when compared to His holiness.

It has nothing to do with what good you've done. It has to do with Jesus Christ and what He's done, whether or not He is inside of your body...by invitation of your own Free Will.

"Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life (I John 5:12)."

Are you *"gathering around"* right now, *"to hear,"* like the tax collectors and sinners? Or are you muttering at what I'm sharing with you, like a Pharisee, or angry like the older son?

Some of you are excited right now! You're thrilled at God's mercy toward you. Others are confused, even angry, muttering. Your reaction shows the group you're in.

Look at the last sentence before Luke 15 begins, in Luke 14:34: *"Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."* Do you have "ears to hear" what is being said here today? Are you listening?

So back to our story...what exactly is the point Jesus is making in these three parables?

The Point

Any guesses what the point of these three stories is? Go ahead and shout it out if you think you know, but think carefully before you do. I'm guessing that you missed it.

The answer is revealed in verses 7 and 10...**JOY!** The complete and utter JOY of God when one sinner repents. That is the point of this parable, and the other two as well.

*"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."*

Look what Jesus said in Matthew 13:44-46.

*"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his **joy** went and sold all he had and bought that field. Again, the*

kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.”

This is the main point that Jesus is driving us to get. Sure, it’s a great story, filled with wonderful lessons that demonstrate salvation, but like the lost son, we miss the point too. But the Prodigal gets it as soon as he returns home...his Father has always loved him and is heartbroken over his lost child.

When the lost son returns his joy explodes! And all of Heaven with Him!

His love has always been there, but the son missed it. He didn’t realize how much love his father had for him UNTIL he repented, and came home. **Then** he realized it when he saw his joy.

Despite his wicked ways, his horrid sins, and his disgusting behavior...he was always loved. Always.

I’ve always been impressed that the father grabs the son, hugs him, and even kisses him. Yuck! Do you recall what he was doing before he “came to his senses?” He was living with pigs! He stunk to high heaven! And yet dad embraces him. Wow! Talk about more shame!

This reminds me of two verses:

“All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away (Isaiah 64:6).”

“We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all (Isaiah 53:6).”

Now despite our selfishness and self-righteousness, the title of this movie is significant because that phrase, ***A Long Way Off***, demonstrates a vivid image about God.

The father was glued to the window, looking at the horizon, straining to see the slightest glimmer of movement on the road, every...single...day. He was longing for his son’s return, like a mother hen gathers her chicks.

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing (Matthew 23:37).”

There’s that Free Will thing again. “...but you were not willing.”

And when the son finally does appear as that fuzzy mirage on the heated horizon...the father RAN to him, something a man of means never did in that culture, overjoyed with

love! That, my friend, is God's heart to you...before you repented, stumbling on the horizon, today when you sinned, and tomorrow when you fail miserably...

GOD LOVES YOU!

Desperation & Restoration

First things first. Sometimes we need to be flat on our backs before we bother to look up.

That's what happened here with this Prodigal Son. He was living in the worst situation in his society, feeding swine, which are considered the splinters at the bottom of the barrel. They are filthy and not to be touched.

And it took this much of a fall to wake him up. The first step in solving a problem is to realize a problem exists, right?

This Prodigal Son had to be so broken down, so starving, so demoralized and crushed, that he was willing to be embarrassed and come home in utter shame—after taking a third of the estate and squandering it—to wake up to his wretchedness.

If you do not know Christ, will it take that much heartache and pain to get your attention? Your comfortable existence is a trap. All your possessions and status symbols are a mirage to keep you unaware of your need. God may need to knock you down so that you are flat on your back to see your need for forgiveness.

I pray it won't take that, but I also pray it does happen if you're that blind to His love and your sinful state before a holy, righteous, and loving God. My friend, don't fool yourself...you're feeding pigs when you could be celebrating a clear conscience.

I'd like to finish up today with one of the most memorable portrayals of "*The Prodigal Son*" from the 1977 movie *Jesus of Nazareth*, where the conflict of these two brothers is cleverly depicted with Matthew and Peter's relationship.

Matthew, as a tax collector, is a traitor to his people and Peter wants nothing to do with his sinful lifestyle. A First Century *Pride and Prejudice* of sorts.

Take a look at this magnificent scene where Jesus comes to Matthew's house party, and Peter remains outside in the doorway, brooding, and think about where you stand with God today:

[Jesus of Nazareth](#)

"Forgive me, Master. I'm...I'm just a stupid man." What a great line!

That is the gospel in a nutshell. At that point, Peter repents and realizes he is no better than this sinful tax collector. We are **all** sinners. We **all** need to come home to the Father. We **all** need to break, to bow, to surrender...and admit we are wrong and have offended a holy God...who loves us deeply.

If you are still out there on the highways of life, squandering what He has given you, your life and all your talents, my prayer for you today is that you will come to your senses, repent, and make it a Very Happy Father's Day for your Father in Heaven.

He is watching now, staring at you while you are still ***A Long Way Off***, just like Jake, hoping you will appear on the horizon and come home to Him...today. I beg you not to be too proud to come home and apologize to a Father who loves you dearly, even to the point of death. Be humble and repent.

Now I also want to remind you that as an earthly father, you only have 940 Saturdays to spend with your kids, and you've already spent 260 of them by their fifth birthday. So please give some thought to what you're doing for fun with your kids next weekend. Maybe even let them decide, eh?

Let's pray.