I have been incredibly blessed to have been born into a wonderful Christian family with parents who raised me to know and love Jesus. And the older I get, and the older my own children get, the more I recognize just how important that is, and just how blessed I have been to have the family that I do. I have a really good relationship with my parents, we get along really well, and my dad is one of my best friends. But right before it was time for me to leave for college, my parents and I clashed big time. Maybe you went through a time like that yourself, or maybe you and your own kids have gone through a phase where you really didn’t get along well. We went through several months of that before I left home where I had no idea what my parent’s problem was, and I’m sure they were thinking the very same thing about me.

I remember one time when I was doing laundry and I had loaded the washer unevenly. It did one of those things where the washing machine was dancing across the floor. My dad came out and started to tell me how to load it evenly so it wouldn’t do that. And instead of listening and learning something, I smarted off to him and said, ‘And when was the last time you did laundry?’ I don’t know if you’ve ever had this experience before, but as an 18 year old kid, there was a look in my dad’s eyes that made me wonder if I were going to live to see nineteen. Needless to say, that was not a very wise thing for me to have said to my father. Thankfully, once I was out of the house and on my own the relationship between my parents and I improved a lot. It was just me being the headstrong kid who was ready to finally get out of the house.

Last week we started talking about a parable that Jesus told in Luke 15, the Prodigal Son. And this is a story of another headstrong kid who also couldn’t wait to get out of his father’s house and away from all the things that he imagined were holding him back from his own happiness. This was a kid who didn’t want to do things his father’s way, who didn’t want to work on the family farm. He had big dreams, and an even bigger ego to go with it. This story has an eventual happy ending, but in the meantime, there is a lot of hurt, a lot of heartache, and a lot of arrogance going on in this family on the part of not just the younger brother, but his older brother as well.

So, today we are going to dig into the beginning of that hurt and heartache, the decision of the younger son to take his portion of the estate, and leave his home, his father, and everything he knew, to go off on his own. A decision that ended in tragedy and suffering.

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.

Luke 15:11-13 ESV

We’ve all seen those kids who clash with their parents so hard that they end up leaving home and doing exactly the opposite of what their parents raised them to do. This young man was after the things of the world. He wanted to get off the farm, get out and see the world, and do whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted. Most children go through a time like that when it’s time to get out of the house, they don’t want to be under their parent’s rules anymore. But the parable of the prodigal son is not just adolescent rebellion, it is far more than that. This was far more serious and far more hurtful than just a simple rebellion against authority. We may think of this young man as just a rude and impulsive kid who was irresponsible and entitled, but the reality of what he did was far worse than that.

It may seem at first that this young man just wanted to go out and see the world, have some fun. But there was a more dramatic break here, a deeper hurt, more division between father and son than we recognize at first. It’s easy to miss, especially since Luke just states it kind of matter-of-factly and quickly moves on. But what is really happening in 15.12 is something that would have shocked the crowds that Jesus was talking to. It was an unheard-of event. This young man asked for his share of an inheritance that was coming to him while his father was still living. And that would have been a huge slap in the face to the father, and to the rest of the family

Later on in the story, we find out that the family farming operation was a successful one, complete with servants who never had to worry about their basic needs, things like food, clothing, and shelter, because the boy’s father would make sure their needs were met. So, this is not a small fortune that this young man has squandered, it is a very significant one. He had the means to make a comfortable life for himself, yet he blew all his wealth on wild living.

There were two brothers in this family, so the inheritance would have been split between them. But in Jewish culture, the eldest son always got a double portion of the inheritance. So, this young man was asking for a third of his father’s net worth. He was asking for a third of the family farming business in cash. First of all, I want you to imagine what it would be like to take a family business or a family farm, and suddenly cash out a third of its value. For most businesses, cashing out far less than that would be pretty detrimental and make things very difficult moving forward. Add to that the fact that the father probably didn’t have a third of his net worth in cash on hand. His net worth would have been tied up in land, possessions, crops in storage, maybe some farming equipment and livestock. And so, to comply with his son’s request, this man probably had to seriously shuffle his business and his property around, sell some land, and give up sources of future income that could help balance out the tough financial position his son was putting him in. So, this young man was not only putting his family in a tough financial position, but also crippling their ability to make up the difference later. And all because money was more important to this young man than his family. This young man cared more for his own desires and his own temporary happiness than he did for the safety, security, and financial stability of his family. But it also meant that he cared more for his father’s money than he did for his father himself.

It is always a tragedy when estates and inheritances come between family members after a loved one has passed away. I have seen some families become completely divided after a dispute over an inheritance, siblings who never spoke to one another again after their parents died because they couldn’t divide the estate fairly. But this inheritance came between this family before the father had even died. This young man’s love of money came between he and his family, and created a chasm between he and his father.

In the Henri Nouwen’s book about the prodigal son, he writes about a man named Kenneth Bailey, who asked people from cultures all around the world about how this situation would go over where they lived. He said, “For over 15 years I have been asking people of all walks of life from Morocco to India and from Turkey to the Sudan about the implications of a son’s request for his inheritance while the father is still living. The answer has always been emphatically the same…the conversation runs as follows: Has anyone ever made such a request in your village? Never! Could anyone ever make such a request? Impossible! If anyone ever did, what would happen? His father would beat him, of course!” And when he asked why, the answer was, “Because the request means he wants his father to die.”

This was much more than just adolescent rebellion or a young man wanting to get out on his own. This was a son telling his father, “I cannot wait for you to die. I want to get on with my life, and you are in my way. I want out.” It was a son telling his father that he valued his money more than his own father’s life, that he cared more about his fortune than his father’s wellbeing. Because in the culture that they lived in, even if the estate had passed on to a father’s sons before his death, it was the responsibility of the sons of a family to care for their parents until they died. So, the money that his son would have gotten was not for him to spend however he wanted to. It was meant to stay within the family, to continue providing for the family as a whole. And yet, this young man took a third of all that his family had and blew it on partying and having a good time. If his older brother had decided to do the same thing, it would have meant that their father would have been penniless, he would be out on the streets with nothing to his name. That’s why all the people that Kenneth Bailey asked about such a request said the father would beat their sons for even asking the question. So, this young man rejected his father and his home, all for the sake of money. But that’s not all he rejected.

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.

Luke 15:13-16 ESV

This isn’t just youthful rebellion, and it’s not just a rejection of his father and disregard for his wellbeing. This is a heartless rejection of the home that he was raised in, and a drastic cut from every tradition, every friend, and every family member that he grew up with, including the faith that he would have known all his life.

This young man went off to a ‘distant country’ in which nothing is important that was held dear at home. Jesus was speaking to some of the most devout Jews of his time, so he emphasized the depth of this young man’s depravity by talking about him working for a man who raised pigs. Jewish law outlined exactly what kinds of animals the Jewish people could eat, and even be around. And pigs topped the list of unclean animals. There were a lot of unclean animals, but pigs were often used to indicate pagan people, or people who lived counter to God’s laws, so pigs were seen as especially disgusting or repulsive to the Jews.

In fact, the enemies of the Jews used that against them. Around 168 BC Antiochus Epiphanies, a ruler of the Seleucid Empire, purposely slaughtered a pig in the Jewish temple as an offering to pagan gods in order to desecrate the temple and mock the Jewish people. So, this was not just another unclean animal to the Jews, this was something that had been used against them as a people not so long before Jesus told this parable. This young man working on a pig farm, feeding these animals that are so very delicious, but also so very unclean to the Jews, would have been another shocking moment in Jesus’ parable. Not only did this young man reject his family and home, but was also rejecting God. All of his ideals, all of his morals, all of the wisdom passed on to him by his family and his culture, and his faith, his entire heritage thrown away in one arrogant decision. And feeding the pigs day after day was a reminder of just how far gone this young man was, just how big of a divide there was between him and his home, and between him and his God. This young man cared more for his own desires and his own temporary happiness than he did for virtually anything else.

He cut ties with his family, his community, his culture, and even his relationship with God himself, all for the sake of his own temporary happiness. And his choice to live his life selfishly created this rift between him and the only place where he was truly at home, between him and the father who loved his son more than anything else.

One of the most powerful lessons that we learn from the actions of the prodigal son, is that we often do the very same thing. The rebellion of this young man against his father serves as a mirror for the way that we often interact with God. Because Jesus didn’t tell this parable to show parents how to deal with teenage rebellion. He told this parable to show us what it is like when we rebel against Our Heavenly Father. He is the perfect father, the one who can provide all that we need, the one who loves us unconditionally. And yet we often turn aside from the straight road that he has laid out for us, and we choose to go our own way.

When we put a higher priority on what we want, and what we desire, than we do on following after what God wants for us, we are acting just like this prodigal son. When we abandon God and go our own way, when we care more for what we want than what God wants, we are acting just like this prodigal. When we live our lives selfishly, only focused on the things we want, we create this same kind of rift between us, and the only place we are truly at home, between us, and our Heavenly Father who loves us more than anything. We are often, and in many different ways, exactly like this young man who was impulsive, selfish, and irresponsible with what he had. We are like this young man who threw away all the best things in his life, his family, his home, and the love of his father, for a short time of temporary happiness.

So, here’s my question for you today: how are you like the prodigal son? Obviously, there aren’t too many of us who squander everything we have, and forsake our entire family, heritage, and culture. And I don’t even mean did you ever have a rebellious stage, where you didn’t want to be under your parents thumb anymore. What I mean, is how have you left God behind? How have you left the home, the care, and the unconditional love that only God can provide?

There are a lot of ways that can happen. When we decide to go after the things of the world instead of the things God desires for us, we are leaving God behind. If we pursue wealth, power, prestige, fame, influence, or pleasure over God, then we have left the home that we have in him and have abandoned the unconditional love of our Heavenly Father.

Unconditional love is hard for us to understand, and sometimes we can’t wrap our minds around the fact that God loves us like that. When we listen to the world that tells us that we will not be loved unless we earn it, that we will not be worth anything unless we prove that we are worth something, that we have to earn acceptance through some effort or work of our own, then we are abandoning the unconditional love of God. When we base our self-worth and our value on how we see ourselves compared to other people, then we are abandoning the unconditional love of God. Going after the things of the world makes us deaf to the voice of God, and blind to what God is doing in our lives. And when we do that, we ignore the fact that we belong to God, that we are made by him, that we are sustained by him, and that we are cared for by him.

If we run after the things of this world, we are abandoning God, denying our need for him, and acting as if we can find everything that we need on our own. With kids who are three and four at home, the last couple of years in our house has been filled with shouts of “I will do it by myself”. While that’s a good thing for little kids as they are growing up, learning to be independent. But it’s not such a good thing when we choose to go our own way and leave God behind. Nouwen says, “…it’s almost as if I want to prove to myself and to my world that I do not need God’s love, that I can make a life on my own, that I want to be fully independent. Beneath it all is the great rebellion, the radical ‘No’ to the Father’s love, the unspoken curse: I wish you were dead.’”

One of the things that we have to understand before we can fully appreciate and understand the immensity of the grace and mercy we receive from Jesus is the depth and gravity of our own sin. The story of the prodigal helps us to understand just how far we run from God when we choose to go our own way. It helps us to understand just how deeply we hurt the heart of God with our sin, what it does to our relationship with him, and just how ugly it gets. In order to understand what our Savior did for us, we first have to understand how great our need for a Savior is. Nouwen says it like this, “The finding has the losing in the background, the returning has the leaving under its cloak. Looking at the tender and joy-filled return, I have to dare to taste the sorrowful events that preceded it. Only when I have the courage to explore in depth what it means to leave home, can I come to a true understanding of the return.”

The same is true of us. In order for us to know the grace and the mercy of Jesus, in order for us to rest in the warm embrace of the father, we have to first recognize and admit our sin and our rejection of God to begin with. The prodigal had to start on that road home, but as soon as he was in sight, it was the father who ran to his son, wrapped him in that warm embrace, and threw a celebration because his son was home safe and sound.

The good news of this story, and ***the*** Good News of the Gospel, is that God is waiting with open arms for us to come home. We’re going to have the band come forward, and they are going to play a song of invitation. Maybe you have never been in the Father’s embrace before. Maybe you grew up surrounded by that love, grew up knowing God, but abandoned it years ago. Or maybe you try to live in that love, you try to live connected to God, but like Henri Nouwen, you surprise yourself with how often you still abandon Him. The good news is that the Father is there to embrace you, to welcome you home no matter where you’ve been, no matter what you’ve done, no matter how much you think you don’t deserve it. He is waiting with open arms and unconditional love, and it’s time to come home. And if today is the day that you need to run back home to God, we invite you to come find me, or Rod, or one of the elders and do that right now.