For the last couple of weeks, we’ve been looking at the parable of the prodigal son that Jesus told in Luke 15. There is so much depth to what Jesus teaches here, and when we begin to understand that depth, it gives us such a clear picture of the way that God interacts with us when we run far from him, and then when we return home. So far, we have looked at this story from the perspectives of two of the characters that Jesus talks about. We looked at the character of the father, and the way that he treated both of his sons when they strayed from him, the way that he treated even the prodigal with unconditional love. Last week we took a look at the prodigal himself and how he left his home, his father, his heritage, and even his faith behind to strike out on his own. We saw how he wasted all that he had, and ended up in some far-off country where all the things that were important at home no longer mattered.

Well today, we are going to dig deeper into the character of the prodigal. Last week we looked at why the prodigal left home, and the hurt and heartache he caused, but this week we are going to zero in on what brought him home, what brought him to his senses and made him return to his father after all he had done. And if you’re anything like me, you’ll see where you fall into this story at this point. Through this part of the story we can see the times in our lives that we have realized we were on a track away from God, and knew it was time to come back home to him.

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!

Luke 15:11-17 ESV

This son who had been so arrogant, so conceited, and so uncaring about his family before, finally realized what he was lacking, he finally realized his mistake, and decided to go back home. This young man left home wealthy, with a lot of money and a lot of pride, but he returned home with nothing. But what I want you to realize is this goes a lot deeper than just the prodigal’s net worth. We always think about the money side of it, but it goes far deeper than finances. The money this young man has squandered is just a small part of what he has lost while he was away from home. He has also lost his self-respect and dignity, his reputation, his honor, and even his health. This young man was so hungry that he longed to eat the food he was giving to the pigs.

Even though he was starving, even though he was taking care of these pigs who had enough value to their owner to be fed and taken care of, their herdsman, this young man, had no value to anyone in that far off country, no one cared for him. And it was at that moment that the young man began to realize just how lost he had become. When he found himself wanting to be treated as the pigs he was taking care of, that’s when he realized he had lost not just his money, but every last shred of humanity, every bit of dignity that he once had. When he realized no one in the distant country he was in cared enough for him to even give him pig feed, he realized how utterly alone he was.

He had lost everything and everyone whom he had once known, with whom he had anything in common. He wasn’t even considered a fellow human being by those around him, not even worth giving food to save his life. And it was that utter shock of just how much he had lost, just how utterly alone he was that began to bring him back to his father. This was a wakeup call. It was only then that he understood what he had done, that he had gone down the road that led not to joy and happiness and life, but to death.

But somewhere deep down, through all the loss he endured, he still clung to the idea that he was still the son of a father who loved him. Through all the things that he had lost, the one thing he hadn’t lost yet was his identity as his father’s son. This boy who was once much like his father, on track to become like him, is now in a worse condition than his father’s servants. But the one thing he has going for him is that he is still his father’s son. When this young man had lost everything else that he thought was a part of his identity, when he lost his money, his independence, his ability to take care of himself, when his arrogance finally faded, he had that one thing left. He had run away from everything that it meant to be his father’s son, he had come to this far-off country to get away from all of that. But when he hit rock bottom, the one piece of his identity that was left was that he was the son of his father.

His return didn’t start when he took the first step down the road. It began when he reclaimed his identity as the son of his father, even if he had lost all the dignity and pride that went along with it. He still had a claim to sonship, not by his own merit, not because of anything he had done, but because of who he was, and more importantly, because of who his father was. But I want you to notice what he did next, he planned out what he was going to say to his father, the deal that he wanted to make with him, an apology of sorts. So, he prepared this speech:

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.”’

Luke 15:18-19 ESV

That was the game plan, that's how this son was going to get back into his father's good graces. He had a long road home, and I’m sure he practiced his speech all the way home. But when he finally arrived at home, he didn’t even have a chance to speak, he was so overwhelmed by the father’s love.

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.

Luke 15:20 ESV

Can you imagine the emotion of that moment, the absolute joy of a father who just found out his son was still alive and okay? The emotion of a son who had utterly betrayed his father and his family, and was suddenly treated with such compassion and grace? But then it’s almost as if the son remembered what he was there for, he remembered all that he had done. You can almost picture him pushing away from the father’s embrace to say what he came to say.

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.’

Luke 15:21 ESV

He finally got his prepared speech in, he told his father he was not worthy to be his son, and that he would be a hired servant instead. And his father didn’t miss a beat. He totally ignored his son’s plea for his father to treat him as he deserved, and immediately set about treating him as an honored son instead. Why did his father do that? Because this young man standing before him was not just a reckless kid who was disrespectful and irresponsible. This was his son, whom he loved unconditionally.

Now before we start to look at where we see ourselves in this story of the prodigal returning home, where this part of the story connects with us today in our journey back to God, I want to show you two more examples of people we see in Scripture who left the home that they had in God. One ended up returning to God and accepting his place as a son of the Father, the other couldn’t do that. And both of these examples were disciples of Jesus.

The first is Peter. Peter denied Jesus three times the night before his death, despite his adamant claims that he would die for Jesus just hours before. Peter denied that he was Jesus’ disciple, he denied that he even knew him, and then heard the rooster crow, and realized that he had done exactly as Jesus had predicted, he had denied his Savior, his teacher, his friend when he needed him most.

Luke tells us in Luke 22, right as Peter is in the midst of his third denial of even knowing Jesus:

And immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how he had said to him, “Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times.” And he went out and wept bitterly.

Luke 22:60-62 ESV

That was Peter's response when he realized what he had done, when he realized he was on a track away from God, away from Jesus. Peter was broken hearted about what he had done, he had just denied Jesus and created a chasm between himself and the man whom just hours before, he had pledged his allegiance, and even his life to. It took Peter a long time to come back from that, but he didn’t lose sight of his place as a child of God, he didn’t lose sight of his place as one who was called by Jesus Christ. And then in John 21, Jesus reinstated Peter, and he told him to act as a shepherd of the followers of Jesus.

He received the grace and unconditional love he needed from Jesus, and he went on to become one of the leaders of the church. The man we see in Acts 2 on the Day of Pentecost is nothing like the one who betrayed Jesus and left weeping bitterly. Through all that Peter had done, he had still not forgotten that he was loved and called by God, and he came home.

The second example is Judas Iscariot. Judas betrayed Jesus to the Jewish authorities and Matthew tells us in Matthew 27 that he couldn’t live with what he did. He couldn’t even accept the payment he was given for the betrayal. And Matthew tells us:

And throwing down the pieces of silver into the temple, he departed, and he went and hanged himself.

Matthew 27:5 ESV

Jesus knew ahead of time what kind of fate awaited Judas, but it was still the choices that Judas made that condemned him. After Judas betrayed Jesus, he couldn’t accept that he could still be God’s child, he couldn’t return to God, couldn’t bear to turn and repent of his sin, couldn’t accept the grace and forgiveness of God. He allowed himself to get swallowed up in his sin and betrayal. And so, he ended his life instead. Two examples of people who both betrayed Jesus. One was able to come back into the loving arms of the father, and the other was not.

That same choice is before us every day. We can go the route Judas did, where we wallow in our own sin and depravity, get lost in our guilt, lose touch with our humanity, and forget our identity as children of God. That happens to us when we believe the lies that we are no good, that we are useless, or worthless, or unlovable, that we are nobody, unimportant.

When we let darkness and sin and guilt absorb us so completely that we feel there is nowhere left to turn. That dark state of our hearts may or may not lead us where it led Judas. It does, however, nearly always bring spiritual death. When we refuse to allow ourselves to come out of the mire that we find ourselves stuck in and return to the only one who can bring life to us who were spiritually dead in our sins. When we allow our identity to become the way the world looks at us, and the way that we often look at ourselves, as broken pieces of something that cannot be made whole again, then we are running hard away from God.

The other side of that coin is to choose to return to God instead. The way to combat seeing ourselves as useless or worthless, or unlovable, or unimportant is to let the fact that we are children of our Heavenly Father become our identity, to look at ourselves as God sees us.

The prodigal saw himself as unworthy of being a son of the father, he was ready to make himself a servant. But that thought never crossed the father’s mind. He only saw his son running back to him, not the arrogant kid who blew a third of the estate. Because what was important was not what his son had done, but who he was. Not even how his son saw himself, but who he truly was. And that’s something that we all struggle with sometimes.

When we were created by God, we were created in his image. In Genesis 1, as God looks at the different things he created, and he called each one of them good. But then he got to humanity, and he created men and women in his own image and likeness, and then he looked at all that he had made, and it was more than just good. Now that humanity was a part of his creation, God called it very good. That may not be a big difference in today’s language, but in the original Hebrew, that difference is huge.

Despite all the bad things we do, despite all our sin, all our arrogance, all the times that we abandon God and leave the home that we have in him, we can never change the fact that we are created in God’s image, that we have immense worth and value to God simply because we were made in his image, and he loves us. We don’t have to earn it, it is simply who we are, children of God who are loved by him, who matter to him, who have immense worth to God, no matter what. No matter how much we have sinned, no matter how many times we have denied him, or betrayed him, or abandoned him.

Paul calls us ‘dearly loved children’ of God in Ephesians 5.1, and in Colossians 3.12, he calls us ‘God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved’. And when we can start to look at ourselves that way, as children of God, loved unconditionally by him, not by any merit of our own, but simply because we are children of his, then we will be on our way home.

Sometimes we get so far from God that we feel like Judas. We feel like our sin is so bad that there is no return, there is no going back to God. And don’t misunderstand me, just because you sit here in these chairs every week, does not mean you can’t be running from God. The gears of betrayal were spinning in Judas’ heart long before he gave Jesus that fateful kiss in the Garden of Gethsemane. He was a part of the core group of disciples of Jesus, one of the men who everyone else thought had it together. He looked good on the outside, but inside he was running from God.

And we often do the very same thing today. We’re really very good actors aren’t we? We have some very pretty masks sometimes that are meant to hide what’s really going on inside our hearts. But just because we go through the motions, doesn’t mean we aren’t far from God. So sometimes we need exactly what the prodigal son got, a wakeup call.

I talked to someone once that said they set nine alarms to wake up in the morning, and honestly I’m the same way. I am definitely not a morning person. I am most alert and do my best work late in the day and sometimes even late into the night. So, I only set one alarm, but I put it across the room, so it forces me to get out of bed to turn it off. I have to be intentional about it because I know what I’m like when I’m in that kind of groggy state in the morning, I’ll just hit snooze and fall back asleep.

Well God has to do the same thing in our spiritual lives sometimes. We have all kinds of warnings and wakeup calls, but a lot of times we’ll just ignore it and go about our lives, oblivious to the fact that God is trying to get our attention. So sometimes it takes something drastic to get our attention. For the prodigal, it was realizing he was utterly alone and had lost absolutely everything. For Peter, it was the realization that he had actually denied Jesus, the one he swore he would die for. Sometimes for us it’s a sudden illness that gets us to think about how we’re living and how much time we have left. Maybe it’s losing a job that made you feel like you didn’t need God, so that you could learn to trust in him to provide for you. Maybe it takes losing a relationship to realize that you don’t treat people the way you should. Or maybe it takes losing a close friend or loved one to realize that you don’t have forever to come back to God. Whatever it is in your life, sometimes we need a wakeup call, don’t we?

But when we get that wakeup call and realize that we have gone astray and decide to return to God, we often do it in the wrong way. We go at it like the prodigal did. We come in saying, “I don’t deserve to be a child of the father, make me a servant instead”. We come to God unwilling to accept that his grace can really cover all our brokenness, we have this nagging feeling that we still aren’t good enough and that at some point God will get fed up with us and give us the boot. We find out quickly that giving grace and forgiveness is a whole lot easier than receiving it sometimes.

The problem with that is that we are looking at God as a harsh and judgmental God when we do that. Like there is a limit to his grace and we just might reach that limit someday. But what we have to realize is that God’s forgiveness does not require any merit of our own. We are accepted just because we are his children whom he sent his son to die for. We expect the father in this story to say, “And where have you been? What did you do with all that money? Why did you leave? Why did you even come back?”. We expect God to treat us like that too, like a parent waiting at the door for their kid who is late for curfew. And a lot of people look at God that way. As a parent who is just waiting to give their children exactly what they deserve for what they’ve done wrong.

But God is actually a whole lot more like the father in this story. That’s not how this father in this story treats his son, and it’s not how God treats us. This father welcomes his son back with total acceptance. There is no question of where he’s been or what he’s done. He restores him to the proper place of a son even though the son doesn’t feel worthy of it. His son comes home expecting to be treated like a servant, but he is treated like an honored son instead. The father throws his arms around him, he throws him a celebration. He replaces the dirty rags he was wearing with the best clothing in the house, he puts shoes on his feet after his son’s long journey home.

And then he put a ring on his finger. And that ring was more than just a piece of jewelry. In several other places in the Bible, when we see someone put a ring on someone’s finger like this, it is what was called a signet ring. This ring would have contained the family seal, it was like the family’s signature stamp. Whoever bore this ring had full authority and power to make business decisions for the family, they could sign on the dotted line with this ring. The father wasn’t just welcoming his son home, throwing him a big party. He was reinstating his son to the full rights and privileges of a full family member, fully able to make business and financial decisions on behalf of the father. There was no probationary period here where the son had to prove he was capable of being responsible with money once again. The father gave him full access to the family business as soon as he got home. Now that seems like a pretty rash thing to do for a kid who blew through his entire inheritance before his father had even passed away. But isn’t that such a clear picture of the way that God welcomes us and forgives us?

This son was clinging to his own unworthiness, convinced that he would be nothing more than a servant to his father. But his father welcomed him home with no strings attached, with no hint of treating him as anything less than a full son, a full member of the family. His relationship with the father was fully restored the moment he came home. And God wants to do that same thing for you and for me, that's what he wants to give us, a totally new beginning, a totally clean slate. He wants to get rid of the dirty rags of our sinfulness, and clothe us with the righteousness of Christ.

We’re going to have the band come forward, and they are going to play a song of invitation. If you don’t leave today with anything else, remember this: the Heavenly Father that we often fear will treat us harshly and with judgment is standing ready to welcome us home just like the father welcomed his son home, with unconditional love and acceptance. It doesn't matter to the father where you've been, what you've done, or how far away from him you have been. He doesn't require an explanation for our rebellious actions and our sin. He only wants us to recognize our true identity as sons and daughters of God, created in his image, and loved by the father. He wants to offer us that unconditional love and grace that only Jesus can bring us. Because our Heavenly Father wants all of his children, no matter how far we have run, to come home into his loving arms. If you need to make the decision to accept the love and grace of Jesus this morning, we invite you to come forward and do that right now.