

The title of this morning's sermon is, "*Prone to Wandering from God the Father.*"

On Sunday mornings we're working our way through Luke's gospel verse by verse and we find ourselves at **Luke 15:11**. Please stand with me for the reading of God's Word.

Luke 15:11 And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. 12 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. 13 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. 14 And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. 16 And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

You may be seated. Let's pray.

On Sunday mornings we have been working our way through Luke's gospel verse by verse and have reached what is most commonly known as the parable of the prodigal son.

We took a brief detour for a few weeks because of something I saw at the beginning of the parable that I thought was so important I wanted to elaborate on it by showing you a few other examples in Scripture.

Let's back up to the beginning of the parable to briefly review...

Luke 15:11 And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. 12 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.

As we talked in our sermon on these verses, the son's request was incredibly rude and disrespectful. The listeners in Jesus's day would've expected the father to:

- Reject the son's request
- Rebuke him for his disrespect
- Slap him across the face
- Remove him from the family
- Announce the son should be viewed as dead
- And then hold a funeral for him

Instead, we read...

Luke 15:12b And he divided his property between them.

The only thing more outrageous than the son's request was the father's response.

Jesus's listeners would never believe a father would respond this way and give his immature, rebellious son his inheritance.

No earthly father would do this, which begs the question: why did the father in this parable do this?

The answer is the father in the parable doesn't represent any earthly father. He represents God the Father:

- The father in the parable extends freedom that will be taken advantage of and used sinfully, like God the Father extends freedom that can be taken advantage of and used sinfully.
- The father in the parable gives the son what he wants – even to the son's detriment – because he represents God the Father who might give us what we want to our detriment.

And we looked at some other examples in Scripture of God giving people their will to their detriment:

- God let Moses take Aaron with him when he refused to go
- God gave the Israelites meat after they complained about the manna
- God let Balaam go with Balak after telling him no
- God let 2.5 tribes settle outside the Promised Land.
- God let Israel have an earthly king

Now we will see how well – or I should say how poorly – it went for the son after the father gave him the inheritance. Look at the new verse for this morning, **verse 13**...

Luke 15:13 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.

Let me draw your attention to a few phrases in this verse...

First, it says **not many days later** showing he didn't waste much time. He probably took only long enough to get his plan together.

Second, more than likely the inheritance included land and animals, such as cattle he couldn't bring with him. One commentator wrote that the words **gathered all** indicate the son converted all of his inheritance into cash. Then he squandered it on **reckless living**.

Other translations say **wild living** or **prodigal living**, which is where we get the most well-known title for the parable. The amplified Bible says **reckless and immoral living**.

The Greek word for reckless, wild, or prodigal is *asōtōs* (pronounced uh-so-tose) and this is the only place it occurs in Scripture. It conveys the idea of an utterly debauched lifestyle. Based on verse 30, we know he wasted some of his money on harlots.

Third, notice the words **far country**. It wasn't enough to be out from under his father's roof, he wanted to be as far away from him as possible.

He even left Jewish territory for Gentile territory. We know this because he ended up with people who owned pigs. Jews wouldn't have pigs anywhere near them.

Something surprising about the father's behavior is he doesn't go after his son. He lets him go...and this brings us to lesson one...

Lesson One: God lets His children wander from Him.

Matthew 6:21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Where was this son's heart even when he was home?

Not with his father.

The son treasured some other land, so that's where his heart was.

Jesus makes the point elsewhere in the Sermon on the Mount that we can commit murder or adultery in our hearts without going through with it physically.

Similarly, the son departed from his father in his heart before he made the journey physically.

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We talk about parents losing their children's hearts...but it's not always the parents' faults.

This father lost his son's heart even though he was a great father.

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Generally, when we have sin in our lives, we want to be as far away from God as possible. We don't physically go to a far country, but we can get far away from Him spiritually.

What does this look like?

We avoid praying, reading the Bible, attending church and Bible studies.

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I am not going to say that EVERY time people who regularly attend church stop going to church that it is because they have habitual sin in their lives and they want to be far from God. But I will say that SOMETIMES when people who regularly attend church stop going to church that it is because they have habitual sin in their lives and they want to be far from God.

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Please do me a favor and mark your spot in **Luke 15** and turn to **Jeremiah 2**. It is the second prophet after the poetical books: Isaiah and then Jeremiah.

Robert Robinson was a pastor. In 1757 at the age of 22 he wrote Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing. The fourth stanza reads...

Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, Prone to leave the God I love.

This chapter came to mind to me for two reasons as I was studying **Luke 15**.

The first reason it came to mind is the Jews were a good example of the wandering described in the hymn. They were prone to leaving the God they loved like the son in the parable was prone to leaving the father he loved. Look at verse one...

Jeremiah 2:1 The word of the Lord came to me, saying, 2 **“Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem, Thus says the Lord, “I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown.**

God says they used to be willing to follow Him through the **wilderness, in a land not sown**. In ancient times people didn't walk through wildernesses or head to places not sown with seed without a good prospect of reward because it was unattractive and dangerous.

But the Jews were willing to do that when God led them. It reveals the trust they used to have when God led them out of Egypt. To me this seems gracious, because when I read Exodus and Numbers Israel looked like a bunch of rebellious complainers.

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Also notice He says **the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride**.

They also used to love God and be zealous for Him. They were like a young bride with her husband. This was the time of their **first love** that Jesus talks about to the Church of Ephesus.

An application for us might be that when we first get saved we're on fire for the Lord, but we have to be aware of that passion slowly fading over time.

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Now God's approach here is interesting to me...

Judah was steeped in idolatry:

- You'd expect God to give them a strong rebuke.
- Instead, He reminds them of how much they used to love Him.

In marriage counseling sometimes I invite people to think back to earlier times in their relationship when they still had that early love for each other.

I think that's what God is doing here.

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God the Father in the Old Testament looks like the father in the parable. He lets the rebellious Jews wander like the father did in the parable.

When God became a Man in the Person of Jesus Christ we saw Him frequently do this with people:

- He didn't chase them down
- He didn't try to argue them into salvation

Sometimes we might almost be bothered that Jesus didn't put forth more effort to keep people from abandoning Him.

I don't want to spend much time on this, not because it's not important, but because in December I preached a sermon titled, "If Anyone Comes After Me." We looked at a handful of examples of Jesus letting people abandon Him. Let me briefly remind you.

First, was the Rich Young Ruler...

Mark 10:21 And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." Mark 10:22 Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

Now let me ask you something...

Did Jesus know that what he said would cause this man to walk away?

Of course.

So, here's what's shocking...

Jesus said it anyway!

In a sense, this is the one thing you would expect Jesus NOT to say, but that's what He said. He didn't change the message or water it down whatsoever. He knew what would cause the ruler to wander off, and He said it anyway.

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And it gets worse...

Mark 10:23 And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!"

This account is in all three synoptic Gospels and after the rich man walks away, Jesus turns to his disciples and warns them about the difficulty of rich people entering heaven.

In other words, Jesus didn't try to stop him from wandering away. He didn't say something like...

“You are so close. You believe in God, and you want to go to heaven. Do you really want to throw all that away for your possessions? Please rethink things. Your salvation is at stake.”

Second, remember when large crowds followed Jesus after He miraculously fed the thousands with bread and fish?

He knew that they wanted more physical food instead of the spiritual food He was offering.

Jesus starts telling them hard truths about eating His flesh and drinking His blood. Sure enough, crowds – I would guess numbering in the thousands – abandoned Him...

John 6:66 After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.

Again, He didn't go after them, try to talk them into staying, yell at to them to come back. He let them wander and then He turned to the disciples and asked of them if they were going to leave as well...and you get the impression that if they did, He would not have gone after them.

My point is we see this pattern in Scripture – in the Old and New Testaments – of God letting people wander from Him...like the father did in the parable.

And I think this has some parenting instruction as well...

Lesson Two: Sometimes parents must let their children wander from them.

Let me briefly share a story with you that will help illustrate the lesson for us as parents...

About twenty years ago I had just become a Christian in a small church when I received the news that one of the girls in the church had run away and many of the men were going to look for her. And I learned this had happened other times.

I was estranged from my family at that time who were upset at me for leaving the Catholic Church. I became close to the pastor and his family who became like my family.

The pastor's wife shared with me that she saw the parents partly at fault. She said that years earlier their families were having lunch together and the daughter didn't get something she wanted. She threw a fit, got up from the table and ran out the front door.

She didn't really want to run away. She was just trying to manipulate her parents.

The pastor and his wife told the parents not to go after her. They said that she needed to get to the end of the driveway and see that nobody was chasing her so that she would come home. But if they got up and chased her they would be chasing her her whole life...and that's what happened. The parents didn't listen to the pastor and hi wife. They got up, ran after their daughter and ended up chasing her her whole life.

There's a similar lesson for us in the prodigal son's father's actions...

As our children grow up, there must be a point at which we let them make decisions for themselves, even decisions that we know are detrimental to them...in the hope they'll learn from their mistakes, perhaps even suffer for them, repent, and return in humility.

It's hard when someone you love starts down a path away from God that you know is self-destructive.

But there comes a point when people refuse to listen to counsel or receive discipline that they must be allowed to wander. This can be the case with our children in the home and it can be the case with people in the church.

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Listen to this interesting verse...

Lamentations 3:27 It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth.

The Amplified words it like this...

Lamentations 3:27 It is good for a man that he should bear the yoke [of godly discipline] in his youth.

Sometimes godly discipline is allowing people to fail and make mistakes.

Letting a young man bear the yoke in his youth can mean letting people wander and suffer.

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But here's the encouraging thing...

When we wander – or when our children wander – God has ways of bringing us – or them – back to Himself. And this brings us to lesson three...

Lesson Three: God has ways of bringing us back from wandering.

Hopefully you are still in **Jeremiah 2**. I told you there are two reasons I thought of this chapter. The second reason is in **verse 19**...

Jeremiah 2:19 Your evil will chastise you, and your apostasy will reprove you. Know and see that it is evil and bitter for you to forsake the Lord your God; the fear of me is not in you, declares the Lord God of hosts.

I love this verse. It was one of the first verses someone showed me after becoming a Christian and I never forgot it.

This verse is primarily about our sins carrying their own penalties.

Notice it says **it is evil and bitter FOR YOU to forsake the Lord your God.**

It could just say that it is evil to forsake the Lord, but it adds that it is also bitter for the person forsaking the Lord.

Why would it say that?

Because sin punishes the sinner. Our own sin often chastises us or reproves us:

- **1 Peter 2:20 For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure?**
- **1 Peter 4:15 But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler.**

In other words:

- Sin causes us to be beaten
- Being a murderer, thief, or evildoer causes us to suffer

And if you want to see one of the best examples in Scripture of sin causing suffering, turn back to **Luke 15:14**...

Luke 15:14 And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need.

The son's sins began to chastise and reprove him. He learned that it was an evil and bitter to forsake the Lord.

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Notice the timing...

Right when he **spent everything** a **famine** hit.ⁱ There is nothing coincidental about this. It is entirely God's providence in his life. God is going to bring the son to such a low point he can do nothing but look up.

Notice the end of the verse says **he began to be in need**. It says **began**, because this was probably the first time in his life he was in need. He came from a wealthy family with a loving father and never knew what it felt like to be in this situation.

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Look how bad it became for him...

Luke 15:15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs.

Pigs were unclean according to the Old Testament Law.ⁱⁱ To protect themselves from defilement Jews would never touch pigs, say nothing about care for them.

But driven by hunger and need, the son accepted work that was unimaginably humiliating and repugnant to any Jew. Think of an animal or reptile that repulses you...and then imagine having to care for it.

Nothing was more degrading than what the son was doing. This is rock-bottom. He must have been incredibly desperate to willingly enter into such a loathsome position.

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Let me tell you something important about when it says he **hired himself out to one of the citizens of the country**...

It looks like he simply started working for someone...which would be good because then he would have a job and be able to care for himself.

Instead, this is describing the downward spiral he's on and all the bad things happening.

He has become a slave. This is what happened in the ancient world when you had no money or you were in debt. Think of **Proverbs 22:7 the debtor is a slave of the lender**.

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Slavery is a fitting image because his physical slavery to a master pictures his spiritual slavery to sin.

Sin makes us slaves, but God gives us freedom...and this brings us to lesson four...

Lesson Four: Slavery to God results in freedom.

There's this evil belief that God's commands make us slaves and independence from God's commands – or being to sin - is true freedom.

The opposite is actually true:

- Sinning makes us slaves
- Submitting to God gives us freedom

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The son's life is such a sad irony:

- He wanted to get away from his father and experience freedom
- But in getting his freedom he became a slave.

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I get it the difficulty:

- God's commands look restrictive, because they take away our freedom to do certain things.
- And sinning looks like freedom, because it's being able to do things we're told not to do.

But the freedom to sin makes us slaves:

- **2 Peter 2:19 Whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved.**
- **John 8:34 Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin."**

Sin promises freedom...but brings slavery:

- Talk to the porn addict
- Talk to the person given over to anger
- Talk to the person consumed with bitterness
- Talk to the lazy person who can't be productive

If they are honest, they won't tell you that they feel free. They'll tell you that they feel like slaves.

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Listen to these familiar lyrics...

*Let Thy goodness like a fetter
Bind my wandering heart to Thee
Prone to wander, Lord I feel it
Prone to leave the God I love*

What are fetters?

Fetters are chains or cuffs for slaves. Typically, they go around the ankles or necks.

So, this is interesting...

Robert Robinson asked to be made a slave.

And why is that?

He knew he was prone to wandering from God and becoming God's slave was the only way he could walk in freedom.

Listen to this...

Romans 6:22 You have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God.

We experience true freedom from being slaves to sin by being slaves of God.

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Maybe some of you have heard of Old Testament bondservants before?

The Greek word for bondservant is *doulos*.

They are servants who willingly chose to continue serving their masters.

But the thing is, they weren't really servants. They were slaves.

John MacArthur cared so much about this correct understanding that he wrote a book, fittingly titled, *Slave*, to make this point.

These slaves are probably also well-known for the way in which they became their master's slave. Listen to this...

Exodus 21:5 If the slave plainly says, 'I love my master...I will not go out free (or I will not become free, but will remain a slave),' 6 then his master...shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall bore his ear through with an awl, and he shall be his slave forever.

When we think of slaves we don't think they have a choice whom they would serve, but that's not true. A slave could say, "I want to be a slave to this master."

And this is another way the Old Testament prefigures the new Testament...

Everything that we learn about being a *doulos* looks forward to our relationships with Christ. The ways that these slaves willingly chose to serve their master is a picture of the way we willingly choose to serve Christ.

But there's one more thing to know.

A slave could not serve two masters...

Matthew 6:24 No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other.

So let me conclude with this...

We are going to give our ear to a master. We are going to be slaves to someone or something:

- We can serve sin, which results in slavery
- Or we can be slaves of Christ, which results in freedom: **John 8:36** So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

I will be up front after service, and if you have any questions about anything I've shared, or I can pray for you in any way I would consider it a privilege to speak with you.

Let's pray.

ⁱ Proverbs is clear that wise people prepare for the future, but foolish people don't.

His financial disaster is followed by a natural disaster in the form of a famine, which he failed to plan for...

Genesis 41:33 Now therefore let Pharaoh select a discerning and wise man, and set him over the land of Egypt. **34** Let Pharaoh proceed to appoint overseers over the land and take one-fifth of the produce of the land of Egypt during the seven plentiful years. **35** And let them gather all the food of these good years that are coming and store up grain under the authority of Pharaoh for food in the cities, and let them keep it. **36** That food shall be a reserve for the land against the seven years of famine that are to occur in the land of Egypt, so that the land may not perish through the famine."

His foolishness in failing to prepare for the famine can be contrasted with Joseph's wisdom in doing the opposite.

ⁱⁱ Leviticus 11:2-17, Deuteronomy 14:8, Isaiah 65:4 and 66:17