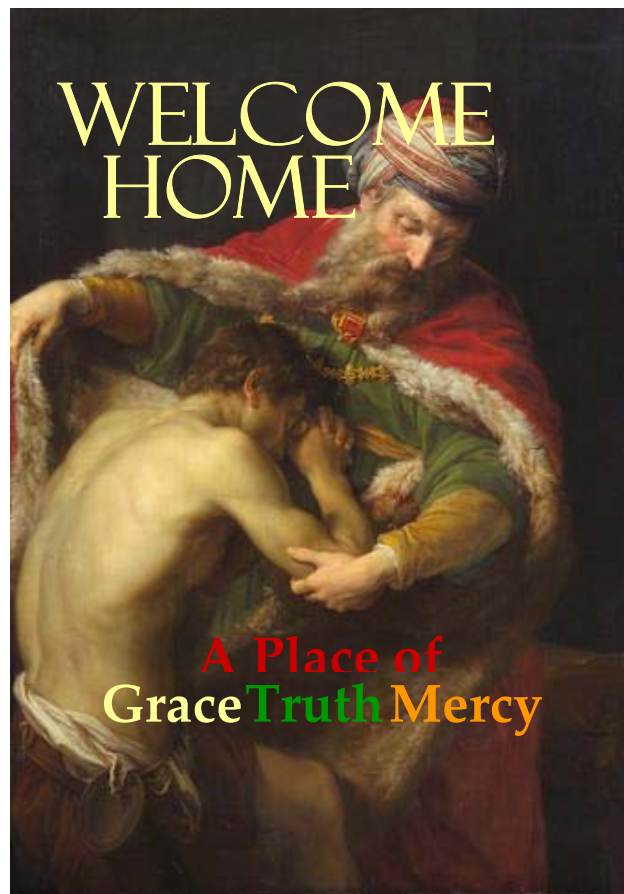


The Covenant Pulpit



"And Grace Will Lead Me Home"

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She was a child prodigy. By age twelve, four books of her poetry had been published. When she was seventeen, she was the toast of the literary world. But her adoring public never saw her. At age 15 she injured her spine. Restricted to a musty bedroom in the dampness of London, her lungs became congested. Doctors said that she would be invalid for the rest of her life. Yet this lonely teenager continued to churn out her magnificent poetry.

As the years passed, her readers would have been shocked to know that she had now become a 39-year-old recluse who never left her bedroom. About that time, a struggling young poet fell in love with her poems. The two began a long-distance romance through some of the most passionate love letters ever written. Then he showed up at her house to meet her for the first time. Her Victorian parents were outraged. Her father informed him that he wasn't good enough for his daughter, and showed him the door.

A year later she escaped her father's cold house, secretly married her young poet, and they ran away to Italy. In that sunny climate she regained her health and wrote her best poetry. But her father disowned her.

For the next ten years she never missed a week without writing her parents, begging their forgiveness. Finally, after sending more than 500 unanswered letters, she received a package from her father. She excitedly ripped it open. Then there was a moment of awful silence, after which she burst into tears. In that box were all the letters she had sent her parents every week for more than a decade. Not one of them had ever been opened.

These "love letters" to her parents have become a precious part of English literature. There's not a parent in the world who wouldn't give everything to receive from their children the kind of letters written by Elizabeth Barrett, with the aid of her poet husband, Robert Browning. But her bitter and unforgiving parents never read a single one of them.

How many sons and daughters long to be reconciled to their fathers? In his book, *Fatherless America*, David Blankenhorn writes, "Tonight about 40 percent of American children will go to bed in homes without fathers." Blankenhorn continues, "...in addition to losing fathers, we are losing something larger: the very idea of fatherhood."

Kevin Costner's *Field of Dreams* became a Hollywood blockbuster because it captured the heart of a nation starved for fathers. Costner plays a man whose major-league ballplayer dad died when he was a little boy. Some inner voice calls him to build a baseball diamond, complete with bleachers and lights, in the middle of his Iowa cornfield. His neighbors think that he's gone crazy. But every night ghosts, from America's golden age of baseball, materialize out of rows of corn to play ball on his field of dreams. One night Costner's dad comes

out to play. When his father turns to join the others as they fade back into the cornfield, Costner calls after him in a plaintive, little boy's voice, "Hey dad, can we play some catch?" No matter what our age, we all wish that we could still play some catch with our dad.

St. Augustine said that there's a "father" longing within every one of us. But it is deeper than our longing for an earthly father. In his *Confessions*, Augustine wrote, "God has made us for himself, and we will be restless until we find our rest in him." Maybe that's why this *Parable of the Prodigal Son* touches our soul so deeply. It's a story made for Elizabeth Barrett, Kevin Costner, and every son or daughter who has longed to come home again from the far country. Today we discover the third of four principles that Jesus teaches us in his perfect parable:

We cannot run away so far, or become so far gone, that we are too far from *the* Father's love.

Luke 15:1&2 tells us what sparked Jesus' parable: "Now the tax collectors and 'sinners' were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.'"

Gathering around Jesus are sinners who have drained the cup of depravity to its last bitter dregs. They haven't darkened the doorway of the Father's house in years while living the wild life in the "far country." And standing off to the side are the religious elite who practically live in the house of God, scrupulously keeping all the rules of their religion. They are scandalized that this rabbi from Galilee would hang out with these sinners. This is their complaint in verse two: "Our God is too holy to associate with sinners until they 'clean up their act' and get on the 'straight-and-narrow.' Yet this Jesus welcomes sinners, and even eats with them. How can he claim to properly represent a holy God?"

So Jesus responds with three parables. "My Father is like a shepherd who will scour the whole earth to find a single wayward sheep. And when he finds that lost and dirty sheep, he will pick it up, cradle it close to his heart, and carry it all the way home with joy." "My Father is like a woman who lost a coin. Though she still has plenty of money on the table, she will search every dark corner of her house until she finds that lost coin. She will then clasp it to her heart with the joy of a person who has found the greatest treasure on earth." "My Father is like a man who lost two sons. Though one is defiled by the gross immorality of the 'far country' and the other is corrupted by the bitterness and bigotry of a 'far country' in his own heart, that man will not rest until both sons are in his arms." He would look at all of us and say, "That's my Father! Do you know him?"

In each of these three parables Jesus makes the same point: "My Father *does* welcome sinners and he *joyfully* eats with them!" But it is the third parable that

drives home his point. The word *prodigal* means “to spend recklessly, extravagantly, and wastefully until you have given everything away.” So this has been called the “Parable of the Prodigal *Son*” because the younger son went off to the “far country” and wasted everything on reckless immorality. But Jesus is really telling the story of his Father. This is the “Parable of the Prodigal *Father*.” This Father wastes his love on those who don’t deserve it. He gives extravagantly and lavishly, with reckless abandon until he has given everything away, even his Only Begotten Son. Jesus wants us to know that we cannot run away so far, or become so far gone, that we are too far from *this* Father’s love. Do you know this Father? Look again at Jesus’ story of a father’s prodigal love:

1. The Long Journey Home

Focus on verses 17-20 of this parable. When the younger brother comes to his senses in verse seventeen, the first thing he thinks about is his father. He says in verse 18, “I will set out and go back to my father...” Weeks ago he longed to put distance between himself and his father, to spread his wings and fly away to the “far country” where he would be free to “do his own thing.” But the forbidden fruit of the “far country” was replaced by famine. The pleasures of its prostitutes turned to the degradation of fighting pigs for scraps of garbage. The pivotal point of this story is in verse seventeen: He finally “came to his senses.” Before we can go home to the Father, we have to first come to our senses. He woke up to the reality that the “far country” offers nothing of value. Only in the father’s house will the longings of our souls be met. Here are three realities:

1) In the human heart there is a longing for home.

The “country” has left the boy empty. All he can think about is home. Home produces the most powerful of human emotions. Some of life’s saddest words are in the song, “I’ll be home for Christmas, if only in my dreams...” I am deeply moved by that line in Janis Joplin’s song, *Me and Bobby McGee*: “Somewhere near Salinas, Lord, I let him slip away. He’s looking for that home, and I hope he finds it.” Elizabeth Barrett longed to be welcomed home by her father. Kevin Costner built a field of dreams to play catch with a father he never knew.

For me, home has always been an elusive dream. I never knew my biological father. When I was six years old my mother abandoned me. I never saw her again. I was shuffled through eight foster homes before I was adopted at age twelve. I always wondered why no one wanted me. After my wonderful adoptive parents died, for a few weeks I felt an exquisitely painful loneliness every evening about twilight time as old wounds reopened and I began to long again to know the biological father I never met, and to be reunited with the mother who abandoned me at age six. I began to fantasize about a warm and loving childhood home I never had.

About that time I read again the epic poem *Paradise Lost* by the Puritan poet, John Milton. For the first time I understood what was behind my loneliness. Milton says that within every human soul is a distant memory of the paradise that our first parents lost. And there is a yearning for the paradise yet to come. That longing for paradise is in the DNA of every human soul created in God's image. Milton says that it is for this reason that we can never be satisfied this side of heaven, and why we are always searching for a better home.

Listen to the judgment in Genesis 3:24 after Adam and Eve's disobedience: "God drove the man out of the Garden." When Cain killed his younger brother Abel, he said to God in Genesis 4:14, "Today you are driving me from the land...I will be a restless wanderer on the earth." When Jacob cheated his brother Esau, he was forced to run from home, an exile in a "far country." Sin has made us all wanderers, looking for a home we've never found. In his novel, *East of Eden*, John Steinbeck says that the human race is desperately trying to find its way back to the Garden of Eden. What I know now is that I wasn't lonely for parents I never knew, or homes I never had, but for a home that is yet to come and a *heavenly* Father who will never leave me or forsake me.

2) Coming home depends on what's at home.

What made the boy want to come home from the "far country"? Look at what he says to himself in verse seventeen: "How many of my father's hired hands have food to spare, and here I am starving to death." He remembers his father's goodness, his kindness to his hired hands, and the abundance of food in his house. Most critically, he realizes that his father's house is better than the "far country." We will never come home to our heavenly Father until we realize that what's in the Father's house is better than what we have now. Some of you are brokenhearted today. A husband has abandoned you. A wife has left you for someone else. Perhaps you have a wayward child or grandchildren who are in the "far country" and it hurts more than any of us will ever know. Do you want them to come home? Then pray that your home will be more attractive to them than the "far country"; that you can love them more; that you will serve them with a better goodness; and that you feed their soul with something far more than they are receiving now. There are millions of people in the "far country." Most of them long for something better. Why aren't they flocking to the Father's house—the churches of America? Could it be that the Father's heart is not in our churches? Or that they have taken a look and not found something better?

3) There are profound difficulties in coming home.

In *The Death of a Hired Hand*, Robert Frost says, "Home is where, when you go there, they have to take you in." But do they really? Elizabeth Barrett's father refused to take her in after 500 letters begging for forgiveness. It's not easy to

come home from the *Far Country*. Look at the insecurity of this younger brother. He knows he's messed up. He rehearses a speech to give to his father in verse eighteen: "I've sinned against heaven and you." There are four reasons why people don't come home: 1) **Insecurity**. He cries out in verse 19, "I'm not worthy to be called your son..." Sometimes we have messed up so badly that we don't feel like we have the right to come home again. 2) **Giving up the far country**. No one can ever come home until they are willing to leave the "far country" behind. He says in verse 18, "I will set out and go back to my home..." This is critical. An adulterous husband cannot come home again until he has given up his illicit relationship. An alcoholic or drug user has to throw away the drugs. The son left the prostitutes, and booze, and wild living behind when he came home. 3) **Repentance**. He said in verse 17, "I have sinned against heaven and you..." The son came home different than he left. 4) **Who meets us at the door?** Imagine what would have happened had the older brother met him at the front gate instead of the father. Sometimes it's hard to come home because we know that we will be met with a judgmental attitude, harsh criticism, and unending reminders of how we messed up. People won't come home unless they are met by the Father's heart. Has someone left you, or disappointed you? Are you ready to receive them with grace and forgiveness if they come home with a repentant heart? If not, don't expect them to ever come home.

2. It's the Father, and not the home, that brings us home.

The son doesn't focus so much on the Father's house as he does the Father who is in the house. If we want people to come home, then we have to be ready to receive with the same extravagant love that the father receives his boy. I want to leave you with six ways that the Father receives his lost son. This is how we will have to love others if we want them to come home to the Father's house:

1) Give what the "far country" can never give.

As long as his pockets were full, the prostitutes loved him. As long as he could buy the drinks, he had lots of buddies. But, when his pockets were empty, his friends disappeared. When he came home dirty and disgraced, his father ran to embrace him. When the "far country" brought famine, his father had food to spare. When the farmer wouldn't even let him eat the pig's food, his father killed the fatted calf. When the "far country" stripped him of his last shred of dignity, his father covered him with the best robe in the house, put sandals on his feet, and a ring on his finger. When will our wandering husbands and wives come home? When we love them better than anyone out there can love them. When will our children and grandchildren come home? When we love them better than their friends can love them; when our homes offer something far better than the "far country." When will people return to the church? When they find a love, an acceptance, truth, dignity, worth, and grace more than they will ever receive in the "far country."

2) Be open and approachable.

Look at verse twelve. The son asks for his inheritance while his father is still alive. It is a rude and absurd request. He might as well say to his father, "I wish you were dead." His father knows that he wants to get his money and run off to the "far country." Yet, he holds nothing back from his son. He gives him his inheritance. His love is extravagant, wasteful, lavish, and reckless; (you might even say it is *prodigal*). But after everything plays out, and the "far country" has taken its horrific toll, the son knows this much: a father who gives everything can be counted on to forgive everything. What will make our children return home again? It will be the memories of what home was before they left. A few years ago, my daughter said to me, "Dad, you and mom have loved me so much that I know that no matter what I do, or how much I mess up, I can come home and know that I will be forgiven and accepted." Our children need to know that we love them with reckless abandonment. Our spouses need to know that. Our friends need to know that about us. And people need to know that about this church. Those who are willing to give everything will forgive everything.

3) Be willing to let go.

The father was willing to let his son go to the "far country." He knew that his son was rebellious, and that he was going to throw everything away on wild living. It broke his heart to see his son go. But he knew that his son's heart was already in the "far country" before he ever left home. Love never grasps. If you have to hold on to someone by nagging, or threats, or badgering, or manipulating, or controlling, it's not love. How many spouses try to control one another by threats and intimidation? How many parents smother their children? But this father doesn't hold on to his money, or his boys, or his own pride. God gave Adam and Eve a free will so that they could decide. He allowed them to eat the forbidden fruit. He lets us go our way into sin, even though it breaks his heart. He irresistibly draws us to himself, but he never forces us to love him. He predestines us to belong to him, but we come because we desperately want him.

4) Let the "far country" do its work.

I find this part of extravagant love so difficult. The younger son is wasting his life in the "far country." His father must know the toll it is taking on his son. The older brother knows. He says in verse 30, "But when this son who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home..." The father knew that his son was wasting his money. He heard the reports of prostitutes and wild living. How many times did he want to run down to the "far country" and drag his son home? He knew that a famine had come to the land, and his son was broke. He must have heard about his good Jewish son tending pigs, and fighting them for scraps of garbage. But still he didn't go rescue him. He loved his son

too much to interfere. He knew that the “far country” would do its work. What good would it do if he dragged an unrepentant son home? Most of us are fixers. We enable others by rescuing them. We become co-dependent and co-addictive. We bail our children out when we should let them face the consequences of their actions. We excuse the sins of others to keep peace in the home or the office or the church. We say that we do it because we love them. But the truth is: we love ourselves, and want to save ourselves the anxiety or pain of watching them suffer. But if we loved them, like our heavenly Father loves us, we would not rescue them prematurely. We would not enable them to continue in their destructive behavior. Some of you have been waiting for a long time. It often takes the “far country” a lot of years to do its work. But if we will pray, and wait, ready to welcome the repentant person home, it will be far better.

Welcome them home with *true* grace, not *cheap* grace.

When the son finally comes home, the father sees him from afar off. He runs to greet him. He throws his arms around him, ignoring his filthy rags and the smell of pigs and prostitutes. His son tries to stammer out the rehearsed apology, but the father will have none of it. He receives him back with lavish grace. But it is not cheap grace that refuses to see his son’s wretched condition. In verse 24 he says, “For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found...” Grace does not excuse or paper over sin or its consequences. But his son no sooner tries to stammer out his rehearsed confession, than his father ignores it and begins to shout excitedly to his servants to bring the robe, ring, sandals, and kill the fatted calf for a party. Grace never beats a person up, or rehashes their past sin, or brings them up again as a means to intimidate or manipulate. The father cries out in verse 22, “Quick, bring the best robe.” The father wants to cover his son’s dirty rags, the mud of the pig pen, and everything else that shows his degradation. Love covers a multitude of sins. Psalm 103:12, “As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.” His son comes home thinking that the best deal he can get is as a hired hand until he paid off the money he had squandered on wild living, but his father puts sandals on his feet and the family ring on his finger. He is fully restored as a member of the family, with all the rights and privileges. Why can the father do all this, when it seems so unfair to the older brother. Jesus wants us to see the fatted calf that will be slain. Jesus wants us to remember that grace is free for us, but it costs the Father everything. Thank God for our other older brother: the Son of God, Jesus Christ. He came and shed his blood, slain as the Lamb of God. He paid the debt we owed the Father, so that the father could give his grace.

Elizabeth Barrett’s father was a churchgoing man. But he didn’t understand this grace. Most folks don’t. Unless we can love others this way, our homes, our churches, and even we will never be the *Father’s Houses*.

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