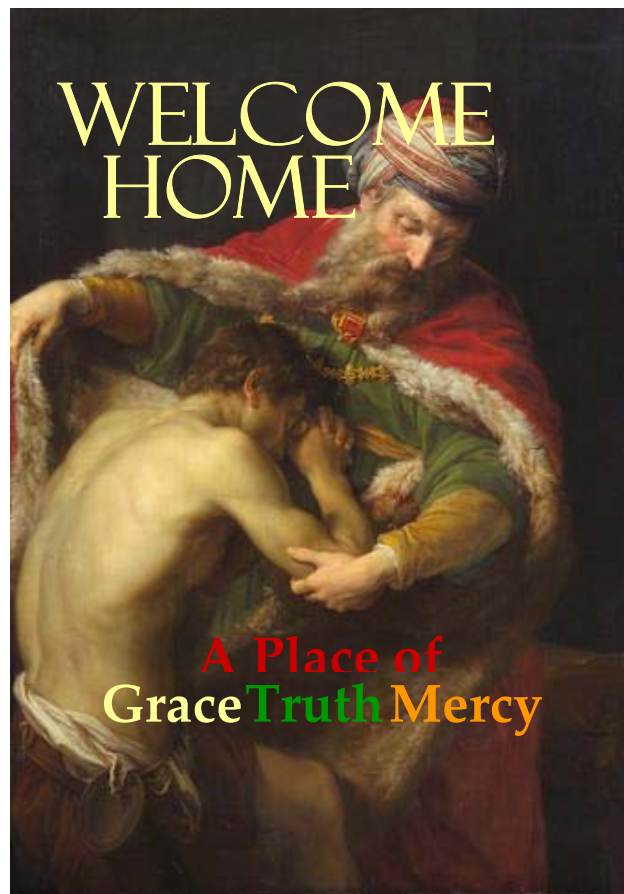


The Covenant Pulpit



"The High Cost of the Far Country"

Dr. Robert Petterson

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Covenant Presbyterian Church

6926 Trail Boulevard, Naples, Florida 34108

(239) 597-3464

www.covenantnaples.com

Ernie always felt like God had played a cruel joke on him. He was born a free spirit, one of those kids who insists on marching to the beat of a different drummer. But he landed in a staid old Victorian house on main street in the Bible belt Midwest. His domineering, austere mother incessantly shoved her narrow brand of religion down his throat. His perfectionist father demanded that he excel in everything in order to make the family proud. Ernie felt smothered in this restrictive environment. He later wrote, "I grew up in a town with wide lawns and narrow minds."

His parents wanted him to become a doctor, but he loved to write. After high school graduation, he escaped home and became a cub reporter for the Kansas City *Star*. His parents were scandalized, but the editors said he was a boy genius. Yet it wasn't long before Ernie began to chafe in the narrow confines of Kansas City. He yearned for high-risk adventure in exotic places. That itch would consume him for the rest of his life.

He joined the *Red Cross* ambulance corps on the Italian front in World War I. It was exhilaratingly-exciting until he was severely wounded. In the hospital he fell head-over-heels in love with a volunteer nurse named Agnes. Maybe this sophisticated woman from Washington D.C. was just stringing the Midwest boy along, but Ernie returned home confident that she would soon follow and become his wife.

A few months later he received a devastating letter. Agnes had fallen in love with someone else. Ernie never got over that rejection. He began to drink heavily—another problem that would plague his life. Though he was a rising star in the literary world, he was gaining a reputation as a barroom brawler. This bitter rage would also torment Ernie to the end.

One day Agnes showed up at his father's lake house, having traveled all the way from Italy to see him. She cried out, "Ernie, please forgive me and take me back." Without a word, he slammed the door in her face. A few years later, his dad committed suicide. Ernie was half-drunk when he snarled at the funeral, "Everyone who commits suicide ends up in hell." When his mother later died, he refused to attend her funeral. Over the years, booze and bitterness destroyed Ernie. He plowed through four failed marriages. Even though his friends called him *Papa*, his children feared his rage. When he was sixty-one, Ernie couldn't take it anymore. He put a shotgun to his head and pulled the trigger.

His family called him Ernie, but you remember him as Ernest Hemingway. He wrote classic novels like *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *The Old Man in the Sea*, and *Farewell to Arms*. He was awarded both the Pulitzer and Nobel Prizes for literature. As a writer, Ernest Hemingway was a giant. As a celebrity adventurer, he was bigger than life. But the real Ernie never stopped being the hurt little boy who could never please his mother and father.

When I look at his life, I understand more fully one of his short stories about a young man who wrongs his father and runs away to Madrid. Out of great love for his son, the father travels to the city to find his estranged son. After looking for days, he takes out an ad in a newspaper: "Paco, meet me at the Hotel Montana, 12 noon Tuesday. All is forgiven. Papa." When the father arrives at the hotel at the appointed time, the lobby is filled with 800 young men, all named Paco, looking anxiously for their father.

Ernest Hemingway's life captures something of the *Parable of the Prodigal Son*. In a way, Ernie is *both* sons wrapped up in one person. He is the younger son who rebels against moral conformity. He yearns to throw off the restraints of his Victorian home in Oak Park and run away to the far country. He wastes his life in high-risk adventures, hard drinking, and audacious immorality. In the end, the far country destroys Hemingway.

On the other hand, Ernie is the older brother who tries to please his parents, who excels at everything in life until he becomes a living legend. He spends his life performing for others, yet never feels like he measures up. He comes back to bury his father who committed suicide, stands outside the Oak Park house, and bitterly complains, "In the end, my dad let me down."

Like Ernest Hemingway, none of is completely the younger or older brother. We are a combination of both, alternately being one or the other. Charles Dickens once said that this *Parable of the Prodigal Son* is the most perfect story ever written because it is about every person who ever lived. Today, in our second of four studies of this parable, this is what we learn:

**There are two different routes to the *far country*.
Both will leave their travelers equally lost.**

Luke 15:1&2 say, "Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathered around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.'" In the crowd are two distinct kinds of people. On the one hand, there are the folks that Luke classifies as "sinners": tax-collectors, prostitutes, drunkards, gluttons, and perverts who have drunk the cup of depravity to its last bitter dregs. These are the younger brothers and sisters living in the *far country*.

Standing against them are "Pharisees and teachers of the law." These are the folks who live in the *Father's House*: morally-upright, Scripture-quoting, follow-all-the-rules religionists. They are the older brothers who think that they have exclusive deed to the *House of God*. They are angry at the way these "sinners" flaunt the immorality of the *far country*, and are especially outraged that that Jesus would hang out with these reprobates.

In his book, *The Prodigal God*, Tim Keller says that the people before Jesus represent the two ways of this world: 1) **The way of self-discovery**. This is the postmodern way. Individuals must be free to be themselves. People shouldn't be tied down by old traditions, outdated morality, or tribal prejudices. We shouldn't judge one another's morals or sexual preferences. We should be inclusive, not exclusive. Who has a right to say their way is the *only* way? Personal freedom is the highest good. Grace, forgiveness, and mercy should take precedence over holiness, truth, and moral standards.

2) **The way of moral conformity**. These are the people who live with moral certainty, following a code of ethics grounded in Scripture. They are convinced that if people don't return to traditional values, culture is doomed. They get angry when they turn on television sets or open magazines and see the depravities of the *far country* corrupting their society. To them, personal restraint is the highest good. Holiness, truth, and strong moral standards should take precedence over forgiveness, grace, and mercy.

Which way is the right way? The "sinners" who go the way of *self-discovery*, or the "Pharisees and teachers of the law" who go the way of *moral conformity*? They both despise each other. The "sinners" look at the "Pharisees" as restrictive, judgmental, narrow-minded killjoys. The "Pharisees" look at the "sinners" as immoral and indulgent reprobates who corrupt society. In a sense you are looking at the two sides in the cultural wars: the *right* against the *left*; the *older* generation versus the *younger* generation; *evangelicals* and *secularists*; *old school* and *new school*; *exclusivists* and *inclusionists*, ad infinitum, ad nauseam.

I would say that neither is right because both are missing something. The "sinners" have left the *Father's House* because they have abandoned holiness, truth, and moral certainty. The "Pharisees and teachers of the law" have lost the *Father's heart* because they have abandoned forgiveness, grace, and mercy. Both the *right* and the *left* in the culture wars are wrong because they tend to be one-dimensional. Only Jesus is right because he has the fullness of the Father's heart: truth balanced with grace; forgiveness together with holiness; morality mixed with mercy. Only when we embrace the Father's heart fully will the church, our marriages, our families, our personal lives, and our culture find redemption. Catch these things in Jesus' parable:

1. When prostitutes and Pharisees converge

Remember what we learned last week: this is really a parable about two lost brothers. Though the older brother has never left the house, he is as much in the *far country* as the younger one. St. Augustine says that whenever we leave the Father's heart, we are already in the *far country*. Both Pharisee and prostitute are equally lost. This is the subtle danger of religion: we can be living in the *Father's*

House, even be working in his fields, and be just as lost as the brother who is squandering money on “wild living” in the *far country*. In fact, we can be more lost because we don’t even know that we are lost. I want you to see the amazing parallels between both brothers:

1) The same starting point: *self-interest*

Look at the younger son’s request in verse eleven: “Father, give me my share of the estate.” This demand was so audaciously rude that there must have been an audible gasp when Jesus uttered these words. To make this demand while the father was still alive was tantamount to wishing him dead. He wants his father’s things, not his father. His father is only a means to an end. This is the spirit of postmodern culture; the new *deism* of our age. 93% of Americans believe in a God of some form—somewhere out there in the great beyond, mostly impotent and irrelevant to their lives. It’s only when they get desperate that they call on him: “Give me what is mine!”

But religious folks aren’t always much different. The older son also has his *self-interest* at heart. What’s left, after the younger brother gets his cut, is all his. But it’s not enough. Listen to his complaint in verse 29, “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.” He too sees his father as a means to an end. His long service to his dad deserves some payback. It’s all about rewards *from* his father, not relationship *with* him. I worry about the prosperity gospel that grips the church. I’m concerned about churches where the altars of sacrifice have been replaced by stages for entertainment. I’m concerned about folk who are focused on getting their needs met at the *Father’s House*; who want a crown but not the cross. How many of us serve in the *Father’s House* for our own benefit? Fifty-three million Americans have dropped out of the church in the last 25 years. Surveys show that almost all of them left because they didn’t get their *felt* needs met. They stand bitterly outside the *Father’s House*, complaining that they never even got a little goat to celebrate with their friends. What was the original sin? The Father walked with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day. But they wanted the fruit more than the Father, the creation more than the Creator himself. The road to the *far country* is paved with *self-interest*.

2) The same end line: *debt*

The younger son took everything the father had and wasted it. He knew that he owed his father a huge debt. He returned from the *far country* with a plea bargain in verse 19: “...make me like one of your hired hands...” The Greek word for *hired hand* speaks of a day laborer. He didn’t expect to come back as a household servant, living in the servant’s quarters. He would come to his Father’s house each day as a day laborer until he paid his father back for all that

he had wasted in the *far country*. But he had it all wrong. The debt was too big, and he had set for himself an impossible task.

The gospel is in this story. We owe an impossible debt to our Father. Our only hope is that he will forgive our debts. Without grace, we can never return home. Do you see that calf about to be slaughtered? Jesus wants us to remember that someone had to be slaughtered to pay for sins committed in the *far country*. The older brother didn't understand that either. He says to his father, "...all these years I've been slaving for you..." In effect, he is saying to his father, "You are in my debt. You owe me for what I have done for you." This is the way of religion. There is a rebuke in the father's reply: "All that *I have* is yours." In short, "What you have, I gave you freely. You didn't earn it or deserve it." Whether you are a prostitute or Pharisee, your debt to your father is beyond your capacity to repay.

2. The lure of the far country

What would make both brothers want to leave the *Father's House*? Whether you are the unbeliever or religious type there are three lures that seduce:

1) Autonomy

The younger brother can hardly wait to get out from under his father's control. Verse 13 says that almost as soon as he gets his things together, he splits for the *distant* country. He wants to put distance between himself and his father. He craves autonomy to do his own thing, to be free from his father's rules, to indulge his desires free from disapproving eyes. When he gets to the *far country*, he seeks out "wild living" places where there are no moral constraints. He surrounds himself with "friends" who will not restrain him like his father did, or judge him like his older brother, or hassle him, or make him feel guilty. The younger brother is the postmodern who says, "I want to free to be me, without you sticking your nose into my business. I want a God without rules, a religion that is hassle-free, morals that are flexible, the freedom to discover myself, an atmosphere where I can call the shots, and people who won't judge my choices."

But the older brother is no different. Outwardly he conforms. He plays by the rules of the *Father's House*. But, he seethes inwardly. He doesn't always like the way his father runs the house. This grace that his father lavishes on the younger brother is as offensive to him as Jesus welcoming prostitutes is to the Pharisees. In verse 32, the father says, "...this brother of yours..." but he says in verse 30, "...this son of yours..." The younger son runs from the rules of the *Father's House*. The older son wants to rewrite the rules. Both want autonomy to do their own thing. After 34 years of being a pastor, I can tell you that most church folks are as committed to getting their own way as are the non-churched. They are often just as rebellious, just as stiff-necked. The danger is that the older brother

is more skilled at cloaking his rebellion in religious reasoning, with high-sounding arguments about his years of service, the sins of the younger brother, and the unfairness of it all. But he doesn't fool anyone, and neither do we.

2) Materialism

The very words out of the younger son's mouth define his heart: "Father, give me my share..." More than anything he wanted autonomy. But living the "good life" costs money. The millennial generation desperately wants freedom from their parent's values, but not their *American Express* card. We live in history's most materialistic society, and are suffering an economic meltdown from years of unbridled greed. We are scared to death because we have become addicted to the "wild living" of the *far country*. There are two kinds of materialism: the reckless and irresponsible spending of the younger brother, and the selfish hoarding of the older brother. The coming years will test us as believers. Those of us who have stayed in the *Father's House*, working our fields, holding on to goats and calves, forgoing parties with our friends, and stashing it away, will be called to search our hearts for compassion when the younger comes looking for help. We will be tempted to grouse with the older brother in verse 30, "But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home..." Like the older son we might even cloak our materialistic hearts with religious rationalizations. But it won't wash with our father or the world.

3) Self-gratification

The younger son wants freedom along with money so that he can gratify his sensual desires. Verse 13 says, "There he squandered his wealth in wild living." St. Augustine wrote in his *Confessions*, "I drained the cup of lust to its last bitter dregs." So did this young man. Verse 14 says, "After he had spent everything..." We live in an age of self-gratification. Once you get on that merry-go-round, it's almost impossible to get off. My friend Jack Monesett says, "There is never enough flesh to satisfy the flesh." You will spend all you have on pleasure and still feel empty. Jack also says, "The flesh never has enough flesh to overcome the flesh." Once the *far country* gets an addictive grip on you, it's hard to shake free. But as surely as the younger brother is wallowing in carnal pleasures, so is the older brother wallowing in self-pity and bitterness. He too wants to gratify his flesh. The younger brother has indulged in *hot* lusts, but the older brother indulges in *cold* lusts. Both are addicted to the desires of their flesh, they are just different desires. And both are incapable of conquering their flesh.

3. The lost-ness of the far county

Remember what St. Augustine said: The lost country is not a geographical location. It is to step out of the father's heart, and put distance between

ourselves and him. The younger son was already in the *far country* before he left home, and the older brother was in his own *far country* even though he stayed in the house. The far country calls both brothers (and all of us) by promising autonomy, material pleasure, and self-gratification. But it never delivers on its promises. In the bitter end, it takes far more than it ever gives. It leaves us with

- 1) **Famine.** We run to the *far country* to satisfy our hunger for material pleasure. We stuff ourselves with “wild living.” But verse 14 warns that a “severe famine” will come. This creation cannot forever feed the insatiable demands of humans filled with a god-hunger. Its resources are finite. Like a plague of locusts, we will ultimately strip this earth in our insatiable hunger. We will wear out our friends, our spouses, our parents, our children, and one another with incessant demands. Governments will run out of money, and taxpayers will be tapped dry. Both brothers share a *soul* starvation that only the Father can meet.
- 2) **Aloneness.** Now that his money is gone, where are the so-called friends who parted with him? He discovers that this world only loves us when we have something to offer. The same far country that doesn’t judge in our “wild living” will not show compassion when the string plays out. He hires himself out to a pig farmer who won’t even allow him to eat the pig food. In a postmodern world animals are more valuable than people. Verse 16 ends with those cruel words: “No one gave him anything.” Look at his brother’s far country experience. He too is alone, out in the dark while the celebration goes on in the *Father’s House*. There is a difference though. Our heavenly father goes out and begs him to come in and eat the fatted calf. He will not leave him alone.
- 3) **Dissatisfaction.** The far country degrades people. It leaves them empty. Both brothers are empty. They both hunger for so much more. The far country does one good thing: Verse 17 says that the younger brother “...came to his senses....” As he looks at the badness of his life he remembers the goodness of his father.

4. Coming home again

Jesus looks at both the *sinners* and *Pharisees*. He looks at Ernest Hemingway, Paco, both the older and younger brother, and you and me. Do you want to come again?

- 1) **Recognize your folly.** Come to your senses. The far country is a losing proposition.
- 2) **Remember your Father.** Understand his goodness. You can’t manage your own life. He *will* supply all your needs and satisfy all your senses.
- 3) **Return by faith.** The younger son didn’t fully understand grace. He came home still thinking he had to work off his debt. The older son didn’t come in because he was sure his father owed him a debt for all those years of “slaving” to prove his worth. But we have read the rest of the story. We see this father who runs, and embraces, and forgives freely—if only we will come home with a repentant heart and a desire to be with him in the *Father’s House*.