

The Prodigal Son

Discovering the
Fullness of Life
in the Love of the Father

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ISBN 978-1-4300-5529-7 Item 006104395

Dewey decimal classification: 226.8

Subject headings: BIBLE—PARABLES / PRODIGAL SON (PARABLES) / CHRISTIAN LIFE)

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Printed in the United States of America

Groups Ministry Publishing • LifeWay Resources • One LifeWay Plaza • Nashville, TN 37234

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About the Author

MATT CARTER serves as the pastor of Preaching and Vision at the Austin Stone Community Church in Austin, Texas, which has grown from a core team of fifteen to over 8,000 attending

each Sunday, since he planted it in 2002. Matt has co-authored multiple books including a commentary on the Gospel of John in *The Christ Centered Exposition Commentary* series. Matt also co-authored a novel of historical fiction, *Steal Away Home*, which tells the real life story of famed pastor Charles Spurgeon's unlikely friendship with former slave-turned-missionary, Thomas Johnson. Matt holds an M.Div. from Southwestern Seminary and a Doctorate in Expository Preaching from Southeastern Seminary. He and his wife Jennifer have been married for over twenty years, and they have three children: John Daniel, Annie, and Samuel.

Introduction

Being a Christian is hard. There, I said it.

Wait a minute Matt, Jesus said my burden is easy and my yoke is light. And you know what? That's true. When I'm fully submitted to Jesus and walking well with Him, that verse makes all the sense in the world. My problem is that I have a pretty good track record of not consistently walking well with Jesus. Not because of Him, but because of me. Maybe that's not your story, but it's mine. Christianity is hard. Worth it, but hard.

As a pastor for over twenty years, I've been preaching the Bible for a long time—been reading it for even longer. And when it comes to my biblical heroes, the ones that I have found over the years that I love the most, I love not because of the good they've done but, because of how they've failed. Why? Because I can relate.

There's a guy in the Bible, I definitely wouldn't call him my hero, or really a hero at all, but I can certainly relate to him. People often refer to him as “the prodigal son.” If you grew up in church you know the story, but if you didn't here's the short version. This young man asks his dad for his inheritance before the old man dies. His father grants his wish and the young man takes off to a foreign land, then squanders his inheritance and is forced to come home with his hat in his hand. That's actually not how the story ends, but I don't want to get too far ahead of myself.

When I was younger, I couldn't relate to this guy. But now, years later, unfortunately, I can relate to the guy more than I ever thought possible.

If you're a Christian that has it all figured out, this book is not for you. If you're a Christian that's never really failed, fallen, or struggled—there might be a better use of your time than reading these pages. But, if like me, you love the Lord, but at times throughout your life you find yourself weary and broken, bruised and battered—maybe even hanging on by a thread—then this book is for you. No matter how weary you are, or how far you've fallen, your Father's love for you is greater than your wildest imagination. I wrote this book partly as therapy for myself, and partly as a guide for people like you. And hopefully, it will guide you back into the arms of a loving Dad ready to welcome you home, wipe you clean, and call you His beloved son or daughter.

Matt

How to Use This Study

This Bible-study book includes eight weeks of content for group and personal study.

Group Sessions

Regardless of what day of the week your group meets, each session of content begins with the group session. Each group session uses the following format to facilitate simple yet meaningful interaction among group members and with the truths of God's Word presented in this study.

START. This page includes questions to get the conversation started and to introduce the video teaching.

WATCH. This page provides space to take notes on the video teaching.

DISCUSS. This page includes questions and statements that guide the group to respond to the Matt Carter's video teaching and to explore relevant Bible passages.

Personal Study

PERSONAL STUDY. Each session provides two personal Bible studies. Each personal study works through the Scriptures to deepen their understanding of the week's topic. Each study includes questions and teaching designed to help participants understand the Bible and apply its teaching to their lives.

BIBLE READING PLAN. Additionally, each week of personal study provides four guided Bible readings that allow you to read related passages from the Scripture and learn to study them on your own. Each reading follows the REAP method, outlined on the next page.

The REAP Method

Each session features four Bible reading exercises, using the REAP method.

Read

Read the passages for today's Bible reading. Read the passages with an open heart, asking the Holy Spirit to give you words of encouragement, direction, and correction (2 Timothy 3:16). Underline the verses that stand out to you.

Examine

Spend some time reflecting and writing about what you've read. Write down one or two of the key verses that stand out as particularly important. Ask yourself these questions and write down your thoughts:

- What is going on in the passage?
- Who is writing and who is he writing to?
- When was the author writing?
- What are the circumstances that the author is addressing?
- Does the writer mention anything that might indicate his purpose or intent?
- How do you think the author wants his audience to respond?

Apply

After examining the passage, apply the text to your own life. Ask yourself these questions:

- What is God's word for me from this passage?
- How will I live differently and be different today because of what I read?
- What are the things in my life that need to change in light of this truth?

Pray

Pray through the passage and your application, asking God to change your heart and to change your life, based on the time you've spent in God's Word.

Week 1

The Problem



Start

Welcome to Session 1. Use these questions to get the conversation started.

Jesus frequently used parables to teach His followers what it means to know and follow Him. Over the next eight weeks we're going to go line by line through a well-known story known as the parable of the prodigal son.

Name one of your favorite stories.

What do you like about this particular story? What have you learned from it?

Stories engage our imagination in a way that other kinds of teaching doesn't. They guide us to see truths that we might not otherwise notice by allowing us to live vicariously through the characters in the narrative. The parable of the prodigal son offers the same opportunity. Whether this story is familiar to you, or you are hearing it for the first time, there's much we can learn from Jesus' teaching. As we study this parable together, we'll identify and answer some big questions that many of us have asked before or may even be asking right now.

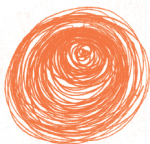
Ask someone to read Luke 15:11-24.

Pray and ask God to use our time together.

After praying, watch the video teaching.

Watch

Use this section to take notes as you watch video session 1.



Video sessions available at lifeway.com/ProdigalSon
or with a subscription to smallgroup.com



Discuss

After viewing the video, discuss the following questions with your group.

Have you or anyone you know attempted to find a better life outside the love of the heavenly Father? What are some reasons we go and search out a “better life”?

Why are we hesitant to embrace the cost of following Jesus? What do we feel as though we are missing out on if we fully commit to Jesus?

Read Matthew 13:44. Why is the reward of following Jesus worth embracing the cost?

Following Jesus is always costly, but the reward outweighs the cost. When people encounter the life-giving, soul-changing, love of Jesus, they turn their backs on the allures of the world and they go all-in.

What changes when we begin to see Jesus as our greatest treasure worth losing everything else to pursue?

What do we miss when we see Jesus as merely a part of our lives instead of our whole life?

Reading a story like the prodigal son, it may be tempting to think, “I would never do that.” But at some point, we all doubt the love of our Father. The temptation for the far country exists for all of us. If it doesn’t right now, it will in the future. This story helps us see that no matter how far we roam, the best life is found in the love of the Father.

Where do you see yourself in this parable? Why should the parable cultivate sympathy for people who have wandered away from faith in Jesus or never experienced it to begin with?

Close your discussion with prayer. Remind those in your group to complete the personal studies and Bible reading over the next week.

Personal Study 1

Why Do People Walk Away?

The problem that lies at the heart of this study is the reality that an increasing number of people are coming to the conclusion that life is more fulfilling outside of God's love. But why is that? What keeps people from committing to follow Jesus? Interestingly, Jesus answered this question with another parable we find earlier in the book of Luke. This parable demonstrates several reasons people walk away from faith

Read Luke 8:4-15.

In this parable, seeds are sown on four types of soil. What are the four types of soil and what do they represent?

Jesus used parables to reveal important truths to His followers. Though this story is often called "the parable of the sower," the focus is not really on the sower, but on the soil in which the seeds are distributed. Each type of soil received the Word of God, and each soil responded differently. Looking at each soil helps us identify reasons people walk away from faith.

No Faith in the First Place

What kept the seed that fell on the hard ground from taking root?

Why should we have sympathy and compassion towards the people represented here?

Some walk away from faith without ever knowing or having faith in the first place. The initial batch of seeds fell on the hard dirt along the path, and the birds snatched the seed away before it could take root. This soil represents the people we know who reject God. The devil has blinded them from seeing the goodness of God (see 2 Cor. 4:4).

Who do you know in this situation? Pause for a moment and pray for them.

A Christian Home Isn't Enough

Just last year, a study from The University of Texas at Austin, reported that the number of college students identifying as Christians has dropped to only 2 percent. Alarmingly, statistics are similar across the country. One of the primary factors leading to this rapid decline is that kids growing up in Christian homes are going away to college and then walking away from the faith.

What happens when we assume that just because someone shows up at church or participates in religious activities that they're committed to Jesus?

Simply growing up in a Christian home doesn't ensure that faith is being passed on to the next generation. A Christian home is important, but it's not enough. Attending youth camp or worship events doesn't guarantee a child's faith is their own. Without a personal saving faith, they are like the seed on the rocky soil; there is an appearance of growth, but it can't be sustained because they never personally experience the life-changing salvation of Christ. When mom and dad are gone, they walk away from the faith.

If you have children, in what ways are you intentionally nurturing and encouraging their growth?

Allure of the World and Shame of Failure

The third soil that Jesus mentioned is filled with thorns that grow and choke faith, “with worries and riches and pleasures of this life” (v. 14). The allure of the world was stronger than their faith in Jesus, so they pursued worldly temptations instead of Him.

The third soil is filled with thorns. In your experience, what are the “thorns” that make people chase experiences and comforts of the world instead of Jesus?

When do you feel this temptation yourself?

Another reason for the decline in Christianity is the increasing number of people of all generations who simply come to the conclusion that following Christ means missing out on the best life has to offer. With the third soil Jesus could also be describing those people who allow worry from past or current sins to keep them from Jesus.

Most folks in this category grew up in church, so they know what God expects of them. So when a pattern of sin enters into their lives, especially a pattern of sin that keeps reoccurring—the weight of that guilt and shame causes them to just give up altogether and walk away.

How do unconfessed sins become barriers between us and Jesus that choke our faith?

Lack of Committed Christians

How did Jesus describe the fourth soil?

The fourth soil that Jesus described was the one where the Word of God was received with joy and it began to produce fruit.

Unfortunately, true examples of committed Christians, those who embrace the Word of God and find their life in Jesus, are becoming rare. Far too many Christians have merely made Jesus a part of their lives instead of their whole life. Instead, some view Jesus as a friend who you reach out to when you need something. This shadow of true Christianity is neither compelling nor attractive. When young Christians see the older generation chasing material blessing while giving lip service to Jesus, what possible conclusion can they come to?

**Who do you know who has fully embraced what it means to follow Jesus?
What do you learn from their faith?**

The fourth soil, the committed Christian, produced an abundance of fruit. Maybe you don't know a fully committed Christian, but that doesn't mean you can't become one. The Bible screams from the rooftops that the greatest and fullest experience of happiness and blessing is found in only one place, and that is in a full hearted, both-feet planted, total life commitment to the person of Jesus.

End your time today praying that God would help you commit to Him fully.



Personal Study 2

The Solution

So far in this study we've seen that many people are asking serious questions about what it means to follow Jesus. People all around us are asking, "If I follow Christ, what will it cost me? If I fully commit to Jesus, am I missing out on life's best?" What is the answer to these questions?

The answer is a resounding "no." In fact, the shocking answer is that the only life worth having is found in knowing God the Father through His Son Jesus Christ. This is the central claim of Christianity.

However, we need to realize that these questions are not new. People have been asking them since the first century. Jesus encouraged His disciples to ask. Today we're going to look into one such account in the Gospel of John.

A Bold Claim

Read John 6:53-58.

Jesus did not literally mean that people should eat His flesh or drink His blood. What did He mean?

Why did the crowd find this statement offensive?

At this point in Jesus' ministry, huge crowds of people followed Him wherever He went because He was working miracles, feeding the hungry, and healing the sick. Jesus paused, looked at the crowd, and exclaimed unless the crowd ate His flesh and drank His blood they could not follow Him (v. 53). Jesus did not mean this literally.

By “flesh and blood” Jesus was referring to His whole being. In other words, Jesus was saying that unless they devoted themselves entirely to Him they could not find life.

Why is the claim that Jesus made still shocking?

How does this claim still offend people today?

The claim that Jesus made—that true and abundant life can only be found in Him alone, is the most shocking and inflammatory claim in all the world. And Jesus made this claim repeatedly. It offended people in the first century and it offends people today.

The swelling crowd following Jesus—drawn in by His teaching and miracles— didn’t understand what He meant, so they turned and walked away. His disciples were standing with their mouths wide open, stunned that the popularity of their leader had just plunged—but Jesus was unmoved by it.

A Bold Response

Peter realized life is found in only one place—Jesus.

Read John 6:66-69.

What does Peter’s confession in verse 68 affirm to us about Jesus?

What have you experienced while walking with Jesus that let’s you know that Peter’s confession is true? How have you found full and abundant life in Jesus?

All people are hardwired to pursue a life filled with purpose and meaning because we were all created to relate to God. Two-thousand years ago, Jesus made a bold claim when He said that the fullness of life can only be found in following Him, and following Him completely. The problem is that if we are not finding life in Jesus, we are looking for life in places we could never hope to find it.

**Peter asked Jesus a straight forward question: “Lord, to whom shall we go?”
Think for a moment about your friends who don’t know God. Where do they turn to find life?**

As you’ve watched these friends search for life in other places, what were the results?

We live in a culture where people are desperate for a different way to live. No amount of friends, success, accomplishments, money, promotions, or social media followers can give us the life we all so desperately desire. These things may make us feel good for a moment, but they can’t ultimately satisfy us.

Those of us who know Jesus, have a responsibility to show other people the way to experience abundant life (John 10:10). How will the people around us see or know a better way if those of use who know Jesus aren’t willing to show them? How are we going to turn the tide of death and despair riddling our culture if Christians live no differently?

How does the way you live show people what it means to follow Jesus?

This world desperately needs to be shown a new way. The world needs ordinary people, who decide to go all-in when it comes to following Christ. Our culture is desperate for a generation of believers that don't just make Jesus a part of their lives, but passionately put Him first and show this world with their everyday lives, that yes, there is a better path—a path of peace, love, and happiness.

What might you need to let go of to follow Jesus more closely? Is there anything you need to give up?

Think again about your friends, neighbors, family members, or maybe even other Christians, who are trying to find life by chasing the things of this world. What might it look like to have a conversation with them and point them towards Jesus?

End your time together praying that God will help you to find life in Jesus alone. Use Psalm 16:11 as a guide for your prayer.

*You will make known to me the path of life;
In Your presence is fullness of joy;
In Your right hand there are pleasures forever.*

PSALM 16:11



REAP

Luke 15:11-24

Further familiarize yourself with the story we will be diving into over these next eight weeks together.

Read

Read the passage slowly and carefully with an open heart, asking the Holy Spirit to give you words of encouragement, direction, and correction.

Examine

Pick a few verses and look at them more closely to gain a deeper understanding of what the Bible is saying.

Apply

Consider how you will live differently in light of what you read.

Pray

Pray through the passage and your application, asking God to change your heart and to change your life, based on the time you've spent in God's Word.

REAP

Matthew 13:44-46

Jesus told a series of brief parables to explain the true value of the kingdom of heaven. Nothing in life can give us what Christ's kingdom offers.

Read

Read the passage slowly and carefully with an open heart, asking the Holy Spirit to give you words of encouragement, direction, and correction.

Examine

Pick a few verses and look at them more closely to gain a deeper understanding of what the Bible is saying.

Apply

Consider how you will live differently in light of what you read.

Pray

Pray through the passage and your application, asking God to change your heart and to change your life, based on the time you've spent in God's Word.

REAP

Psalm 16:1-11

True and lasting pleasure is only found in the presence of God.

Read

Read the passage slowly and carefully with an open heart, asking the Holy Spirit to give you words of encouragement, direction, and correction.

Examine

Pick a few verses and look at them more closely to gain a deeper understanding of what the Bible is saying.

Apply

Consider how you will live differently in light of what you read.

Pray

Pray through the passage and your application, asking God to change your heart and to change your life, based on the time you've spent in God's Word.

REAP

Hebrews 3:12-19

The author of Hebrews provides a sobering warning about the deceitfulness of sin and its ability to lead to false beliefs.

Read

Read the passage slowly and carefully with an open heart, asking the Holy Spirit to give you words of encouragement, direction, and correction.

Examine

Pick a few verses and look at them more closely to gain a deeper understanding of what the Bible is saying.

Apply

Consider how you will live differently in light of what you read.

Pray

Pray through the passage and your application, asking God to change your heart and to change your life, based on the time you've spent in God's Word.