



Country Roads

Part 3 – Finding Your Way Back Home (The Prodigal Son)

Pastor Ted Cunningham

Last week here on campus we had 2,244 people. This is how it breaks down. In the first service, we had 75% capacity. At 10:00, we had 96% capacity. But as I'm looking around, we're doing much better this morning. I don't think we're near 96%. At 11:30, we were at 50%. We have a bus here. Where is the bus visiting from? Oklahoma. We almost didn't allow you to come. We almost said you have to come to 8:30 mass... No, that was never in our thoughts. We were going to have R.P. Harrell get on the bus and stall you until 11:30, but we didn't do that; we were not going to do that. We're glad you're here; welcome from Oklahoma.

People are asking about the plan for growth. Just so you know, our plan right now is these three services. So, again, if we can ask our church family... If you're coming to this 10:00 service, there is no guilt. We don't shame you or embarrass you in any way during this service. We're glad you're here. You have to do what works for your family, but we are asking so we do not have to go to... The next step is get to 11:30 if you can. People ask if we're going to four services. Absolutely not. We're going to do a political series going in to the 2020 presidential campaign and I'm going to preach it the opposite of what your thinking right now. That's our way to get back to 9:00 and 11:00.

We share this with you because we believe we can go to 2,500 or 2,600 on campus. We're up 20% this year right now compared to this time last year. We just ask that you would consider this. I see some pockets today so we're doing much better, but we just want to keep you aware of that.

Today, we're in Part 3 and if you want to pick up that song by James Taylor... Do we have any James Taylor fans in the house? That's cut three on the record. If you would like to pick up the record, we still have a few copies in the back and we encourage you to do so.

This is Part 3, *Finding Your Way Back Home* (The Prodigal Son) in a context as Jesus gives it to us. Let me ask this question before we get started. How many of you love a great celebration? I love celebrating. One of my favorite celebrations... I see it at airports all the time. It's when you walk out through security after you get off a plane and there are families standing there with signs and balloons and flowers. My favorite celebration of all in an airport is when you see the military men and women walking out into the airport. I lose it every single time.

I was in San Antonio a few years back. I was walking out with a soldier, as I always try to do, thanking him for his service. We were talking about his deployment and how this is his first time home and he's excited to get home. I wasn't even thinking about what I was about to enter into. There was his family

on the other side of security. He cuts off our conversation... I thought that was a little rude. But he goes running to his family and I completely lose it. Talk about celebration and cheering. It wasn't just his immediate family. You could tell there were parents, aunts, uncles, cousins welcoming him home from war. I just had this brief moment where I just wanted to go in there and get some of it myself... You know what I'm saying? Just kind of lean in. I'm just going to put this up there to get the tears going a little bit this morning. It's the dad holding his child that he hasn't seen for the last year or two. And how about the times where the soldier comes home, and they meet their child for the first time.

So, today being Veteran's Day, we want to thank all of you who have served in all branches and all wars. If you are a Veteran of this country, would you please stand so we can honor you this morning? We are grateful that you're here and we thank you for your service.

Today we're going to jump right in to Luke 15. We have to get the context right for the story of The Prodigal Son. Jesus is going to share three parables in this chapter to deal with an attitude. Remember we talked about parables last week and how Jesus was always addressing a question, dealing with an attitude.

Luke 15 - 1 Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. 2 But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

When I read that this week, I thought about a time this past year where I was with my friend David Jones in the Netherlands. He hired a guide to take us fishing. We fished for eight hours on this small Jon boat. Our guide drank beer the whole time, which is against the guide rules, I have to be really honest with you. And he fished. Guides aren't supposed to fish and take fish away from the clients. But the best part of it for me was we sat down... I was in the back seat of his car and David was in the front seat.

The guide's name is Stef. He's putting the boat onto his car. Before he shuts the back of his car, he says, "You guys want a beer for the road?" I said, "No, thanks. I'm good." *We don't drink and drive in the US. We don't have open containers and all that.* Then he says, "Do you mind if I have one?" I'm like, *well, I'm not here to tell you what to do.* Our ride back, he's drinking... The moral of this story is not that you go hang out with people drinking and driving. That's not the moral of this story. The moral of the story is are you spending time with sinners? Are you spending time with lost people? Jesus did, and it got him in trouble. He spent time with people that the Pharisees said, "You shouldn't be spending your time with them and you should be talking to us. Why are you talking to those – let's just say it – outsiders?"

For over 16 years at our church, we've tried to always... we strive to be a church that welcomes sinners. We want you to feel comfortable here as you attend. We offer you coffee. We've got these red theater seats. We want you to be comfortable and caffeinated as we declare the gospel to you.

When you start welcoming sinners and you start building your strategies and your programs in your ministries in an environment and an experience that welcome sinners, religious people start to come after you and start to question you.

I want to share briefly with you four myths that religious people believe about churches that welcome sinners.

1. They water down the messages. If you're going to welcome sinners, you've got to water down the message. If you've been here for the last couple of weeks, you know that ain't happening around here. We're pretty strong with this. We don't have to water down the message. What we say, we don't have to change. We declare it in different ways. We share it in different ways. We share it through song and through creative elements, but we don't have to water down the gospel to welcome sinners.

2. They minimize sin or they never talk about sin. We have no problem telling you that you all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. For there is none righteous, no not one. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord. We have no problem declaring that sin is you wanting to be the boss of your own life. We don't minimize sin in our attempts and our desire to welcome sinners.

3. There all about the numbers. Obviously not. We're trying to keep them as low as possible. We're trying to keep from going to another service. We don't sit around in meeting trying to figure out how to grow. We sit around trying to figure out what to do with growth. We sit around talking about health. We want to make sure we're a healthy church. We talk about the purposes of worship and ministry and evangelism and discipleship and fellowship. We want to make sure we're hitting all five of those purposes all the time.

If you were just in Starting Point, we had 40 new members join the church on Wednesday night. You know that this is a passion of ours. We talk about health, not growth. We deal with growth, but we're not sitting down to become some enterprising church, trying to get bigger and bigger.

4. They don't want to offend people. We have no problem doing that. We are an equal opportunity offending church. We offend everybody. If you're a democrat, you're going to get offended all the time. If you're a republican, you're going to get offended all the time. If you're a libertarian, we welcome you. We know there's one in every gathering... who wasted their vote. No, I'm kidding. SEE! We don't have a problem doing that. You got Florida all spun up this morning. They don't know who they are or what they're going for.

Are you welcoming sinners? Do you know someone who regularly uses the F word? If you don't, you need someone. And the Veterans are going, "Got it covered. That's everybody we hang out with." But if you don't know lost people, you obviously aren't welcoming any. Jesus is welcoming sinners. He's eating with them, he's being social with them, and the pharisees don't want anything to do with it, so Jesus is going to share three parables. These three parables confront an attitude. Jesus is confronting the **stinking, religious attitude that says you should not hang out with sinners.** He's going to give three parables; two short ones and a long one. We're going to spend out time in the long one, which is The Prodigal Son, The Parable of the Lost Son.

Here's the first parable that Jesus is going to share with them. It's very short; it's only a few verses. The Parable of the Lost Sheep. The shepherd leaves the 99 sheep and goes looking for one. When that one

is found, there is great rejoicing. But Jesus says this: **7 “I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”**

Then you know The Parable of the Lost Coin. The woman sweeps the house, searches the house top to bottom. Finds the coin and rejoices. And Jesus says, **10 “In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”**

We are a church that rejoices over sinners getting saved. It’s why when we do baptism, which we’re going to do next month... Again, you need to sign up for that. It’s why when you come up out of the water, there is great celebration, there is rejoicing. We’re grateful that you have turned from your sin and turned to your savior.

Today, we’re going to spend our time in The Parable of the Lost Son, also known as The Prodigal Son. **11 Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.”**

Maybe some of you right now have experienced this already or you’re currently experiencing it. Some of you may experience a child, a son that comes to you one day and says, “I’m tired of you controlling me, Dad. I’m tired of you telling me what to do. I’m tired of being under your thumb. I’m tired of your controlling words and actions. I want nothing to do with you anymore. Just give me some money and I’m out of here. And I’m taking the car you gave me. And if you wouldn’t mind keeping me on your insurance and your Friends and Family plan. But I don’t want to be under your rule anymore.”

That’s what’s going on here. That’s the song that was just sung by James Taylor. His friend describes the song *Country Roads* this way and kind of gives more meaning to it if you were following along, and maybe you already know this. The road he’s talking about leads away from his ensnaring family. It also takes him away from shattered affairs, prep schools, mental institutions... He’s going on a journey and he’s getting away from it all, all manners of traps and bums. At the end of the road lies freedom and the ideal life in Carolina, and a heavenly band of angels.

So, the father divides it. **13 “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. 14 After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. 16 He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.”**

17 “When he came to his senses...” There are some parents in here right now that this is your prayer for your son, for your daughter to come to his/her senses. We have a lady in our church who has a prodigal son. I meet with her quite often. She’ll say to me, “I don’t even know how to pray anymore; he’s so out there. He’s so far from the Lord.” She said, “I don’t know what it’s going to take to get him to come to his senses. I have no idea what it’s going to take and all I can do every morning when I wake up is just put my hands out. In my quiet time and my time with the Lord, I just put my hands out and I say my son’s name. I speak my son’s names almost as if into my hands and then just lift it up, ‘Father,

you have this.’ ” She said, “This is a hard prayer, Ted, for parents to pray. For parents to pray whatever needs to happen to my son to get him to come to his senses. I don’t want it to be jail. I don’t want it to be prison.”

For this younger son, it was eating with pigs. It was losing it all and starving that finally brought him to his senses. For some of you, the story is your prodigal has returned back connected to the family, following the Lord, but they were on a journey for quiet some time and you know what brought them back to their senses. Right now, some of you with a prodigal son or daughter need to just be speaking their name every morning into your hands and giving it to your Father in heaven because your controlling or preaching or constantly going after them hasn’t been working. Just speak their name, “Father, he’s yours, she’s yours.”

“... he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! 18 I will set out and go back to my father and say to him...’ ” Boy, how many parents in here want to hear this one day from a child. ***“ ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ ”*** Make me like a slave. I don’t even deserve to bear the name of being your son. ***20 “So he got up and went to his father.”***

For some of you right now that are praying for a prodigal to return, I just want to encourage you. What do you do when they do return? How do you handle it? What do you say? How do you act? It may be soon, and it may be after many more weeks, months, years of praying. When your prodigal returns, don’t remind them how badly they hurt you. You don’t need to go through a long list and keep bringing it up.

We’re not going to see that in this story. When the son returns and repents to his father, the father doesn’t do this. **Don’t recount every bad thing they’ve ever done.** Then, most certainly, **don’t resist them until they prove it.** No, do what this father does. By the way, this father receiving his son is the exact same way God received you when you repented.

So, he returns. The son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and I have sinned against you.” Boy, sweet words that I know many parents are praying for right now and can’t wait to hear. “I am no longer worthy to be called you son.” The son has just repented and what does dad say? Son, I remember the time you... Son, I gave you everything and you took advantage of me. How dare you...

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.”

21 “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ”

22 “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 Bring the fattened calf and kill it.’ ” I’m telling you the Bible is not vegetarian or vegan. If you need it for health purposes, great, but don’t you dare use the Bible to prove

your way. Kill this baby cow... We're having veal tonight. "***Let's have a feast and celebrate.***" This is what it's supposed to be: a celebration not a historical evening recounting everything he did and everything that went wrong. We're celebrating. In the same way, this is the rejoicing that takes place. When the coin was found, when the sheep was found, and when a son returns home, it's the same rejoicing. More than that, the rejoicing that takes place with God and with the angels in heaven when a sinner turns from his sins, when the sinner turns from her sins. ***24 "For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate."*** Does this remind you of the hymn we've sang since the time we started speaking? "I once was lost, but now am found." That's the celebration.

My grandma was a hairdresser in Springfield, Illinois and then in Naperville, Illinois. She told me this story and I never could quite figure out what she was trying to teach me, but it came back to my memory. I can remember sitting at Mary Jane's table in Naperville and talking about the Lord and talking about salvation. She was pouring into me and I was listening. She was an absolutely wonderful grandma. She was a perfect grandma. She would always share this story with me and I never really got the message. I think this week it started to become clearer to me.

She said this fundamentalist evangelist would always come into her beauty shop in Springfield and ask her and everybody in there, "Have you all found the Lord?" My grandma said, "I finally one day told him, 'I didn't know he was lost.'" She would tell me that story and then go on. Grandma was simply saying the Lord is not lost, I am. I'm the one who needs to return home.

If you are here... We're grateful. Last week, we received a wonderful, wonderful message and it was short, maybe two sentences. I hope you are in this service, or maybe you were in the last group, or you'll be in the next. It's simply said, "I haven't been in church for ten years and today was great day..." I'm paraphrasing. Something like that. "I'm grateful to be back." May this church always receive that. When people do return, when people come back to the church, may they find a welcoming environment here that we are celebrating.

If you're here today with a broken marriage, broken relationships, failed job after failed job, addiction, whatever it is you're walking in here with today, here's what this church declares over you. There is a great celebration waiting for you. And when you place faith in Jesus, it's about faith alone in Christ alone and you become a Christian and we baptize you, we're celebrating the whole time. That's what we want to be as a church.

But the story doesn't end there with the son returning home. ***25 "Meanwhile..."*** Meanwhile the story is going to take a turn. "***...the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing.***" He heard the celebration. ***26 "So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 27 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'"***

28 "The older brother became angry..." I'm not a big fan of older brothers. I don't know about you. That's not the point of this story. You know when you see older brother right here, you can also say the

Pharisee because the older brother represents the religious of that day who doesn't believe Jesus should be hanging with sinners, let alone throwing them a celebration. **"...and refused to go in."**

So now we are going to pick up where this attitude is coming from with the older brother, with the Pharisee. **"So his father went out and pleaded with him. 29 But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders.'"**

Stop right there because this is typical religious work salvation right here. First of all, are you tired of hearing religious people saying, "I've never disobeyed your orders"? Its not true. They thought they were perfect. We saw this last week. I've done everything... Jesus held up a mirror to the guy and said, "I know you're not perfect; I just need you to see that."

Your works are not what brings you into relationship with Jesus. Your fruit is the overflow of the relationship, but it doesn't bring you in. "And, I've been slaving for you; I've been working; I've been serving at Woodland Hills. I'm now committing to going to the 11:30 for the rest of my life so we can have people, so we can have sinners come to 10:00?" Yes!! Absolutely! Make room. But we get this entitlement as believers, don't we? Do you not pick up this theme?

This goes along with The Parable of the Vineyard Workers as well. You know that one in Matthew 20. Some worked 12 hours and some only worked an hour, but they all got paid the same. What does that mean? Whether you come to know the Lord at age 20 or age 70, you have salvation, you have eternal life. With the thief on the cross, it was moments before his death. You can't have this attitude: "But I've slaved; I've served; I worked with junior high boys in Sunday school and you're telling me somebody on their death bed can pray and receive Christ and have heaven as their home?" And the answer is YES! Absolutely! And this is also the pharisees going, "We're part of your chosen nation. Why in the world would you allow outsiders into this?" Stinky, rotten, religious attitude. Jesus is confronting it with this story. "We've slaved for you we've never disobeyed your orders." Yes, you have.

" 'Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' "

31 " 'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' " We celebrate that Jesus still breathes life into dead people. We should be celebrating that.

The question for us becomes, "Have you ever had to deal with that?" I know sometimes it feels like we're preaching to the choir, but who are you welcoming? Which sinners are you welcoming?

One man I have always greatly respected is Billy Graham. I've always loved how he's been able to meet with everyone, whether he agrees with them or not. He has been relentlessly picked on by religious leaders because he would sit down with presidents. I tried to find pictures of him eating with presidents. Here he is with JFK. Some of you think this is a great picture. Others of you are frustrated because he's a democrat. Good for you, Billy, good for you. I'm grateful that you're doing it. He ate with many presidents. This is one of my favorite pictures of him.

Not only is he welcoming others and not only is he eating with them... This to me is... If we are walking with our savior and we want to take on the life and the teachings of Jesus, we better be welcoming and spending time with and living out our personality with people we completely disagree with that don't follow the Lord, that are far from the Lord. As he went on in life, he met almost every president. I like this one and I put this next one up here of him with President Obama just to hack some of you off. Some of you right now see this picture and it makes you mad and I'm asking the Holy Spirit to call you by name right now.

A Christian leader in our nation that I have followed my entire ministry and have always had great respect for... he speaks well in my area of marriage and family. I love him. I love everything about him. I remember being with him years back during the Obama presidency. We were talking about Dogwood Canyon and fishing and just shared interests. I just asked him... I wasn't prepared for this response. I said, "So, have you been to visit with President Obama yet?" We went from talking about fishing, which brings great joy, to "I will never go meet with that man."

Something completely changed in me that moment. I want to give everybody grace, but it just set me back. He goes, "They would turn that into a circus!" He just went on. I'm like, *What is going on here?* I didn't say this to him because again, a fool is thought wise if he keeps his mouth shut. It's a verse I need on my bumper, on my dashboard, up here on the stage.

I just remember thinking to myself, *I hope you're not meeting with him because you fear losing 10 million dollars in donations from stinky, religious attitudes.* I can't say this without my lower lip quivering because it makes me so angry. It's like, *You should go spend time with him not matter what religious people say to you. If the Lord gives you that opportunity, go share with him.*

And it's interesting to the culture we live in. A lot of evangelical pastors... and I've been put on the list to go and visit the Whitehouse and do these listening sessions every month with President Trump. I haven't gone just because I already travel enough, but I have friends who aren't going to meet with this president because he's so polarizing, and they don't want to meet with him because they fear what's going to happen in their church.

We're losing our minds! You should be able to hang out with people you don't agree with and spend time with them. And if religious people react, I'm here to tell you so be it. I know your thinking I'm an angry little pastor. But I hope you hear this as passion. I think Jesus would have spent time with every president. I don't think Jesus would have spent too much time worrying about donors. He would have given them parables. "You know we're not going to give you that check this year." "Well, there was a shepherd." "You know we've been supporting you for 30 years and believe everything you do." "A woman lost a coin. She swept her house from top to bottom looking for and found it and rejoiced, but it's even better over one sinner who repents."

We saw it again a couple of weeks ago with Lauren Daigle. She went on the Ellen Show and the stinky, religious attitude crept up again. It crept into the whole thing. Christian leaders, pastors going after her for spending time with an openly gay woman. I'm like, "Good for you Lauren. I'm glad you were there."

You should confront, as Jesus did, the stinky, religious attitude that says you shouldn't hang out with sinner, you shouldn't hang out with lost people.

Lauren said this, and I like what she said. "I think the second we start drawing lines around which people are able to be approached and which aren't, we've already completely missed the heart of God." She goes on to say, "I can't choose who I'm supposed to be kind to and who I'm not." That's the mission, right? Be who Christ was to everyone as well.

I heard a pastor say it this week in the middle of all of this and I thought it was perfect. I'm paraphrasing. I'm not saying it exactly how he said it, but he said, "Hang out with lost people to the point it frustrates religious people and then you're doing a pretty good job following your savior."

Here's how we as a church process all of this as we celebrate those who turn to Jesus. Something is going on in the church today. You see a few people writing and talking about it. I haven't ever shared much on it because... Someone has finally put it into a good framework for me. This is very important. We welcome sinners and we rejoice when they get saved. Something is going on in the church today and I do believe it's people holding back on the message, holding back on topics, holding back on confronting sin openly because we're rejoicing over sinners coming. We're not rejoicing over brokenness. We're not rejoicing and celebrating sinfulness. We don't worship that here. We worship Jesus, so we welcome sinners and we save the celebration for when they get saved. And when they come to Christ is when the party begins. That's when the rejoicing begins.

But in the meantime, we welcome sinners. For some of you, this has been a struggle for you and entering into Thanksgiving and Christmas, is where it's really going to be tested. You have a child right now that's going to return at Thanksgiving or Christmas with a friend, with a boyfriend, with a girlfriend, with a partner that you don't approve of. What do we do? You don't have to celebrate anything; you have to welcome. May your dinner table be open. "Ted, they stand against everything we do." Jesus welcomed sinners and he ate with them. May you do that this Thanksgiving. May you do that this Christmas.

We want to do that here. We will always be a place... Here's what we say. Get a cup of coffee, come get comfortable, and die. Die to yourself and make Jesus the Lord of your life. Be comfortable and caffeinated in the death process. We welcome you and we're glad you're here and we will continue to preach the gospel, we will continue to teach, and wait for that great celebration when you turn to the Lord.

May we as a church... Again, I think I'm preaching to the choir. May we never develop the stinky, religious attitude that says those people are too gone, those people are too lost, those people are too much sinners for us. It's something Joe White has said around here for years. He loves the smell of marijuana at Woodland Hills Family Church. After Tuesday, we're going to get a lot more of it. Our state voted it in. I'm sitting here going, *Yeah, I pray that you wouldn't smell that and be like "What are they doing here," but that you would smell it and go, "Glad they're here. They've come to the right place."*

Father, in the name of Jesus, we are grateful for salvation that comes through faith alone in Christ alone. We think of our friends from Paradise today that they leave here today blessed, that they leave here today knowing that they have the support and the care from this church. Give us the wisdom and discernment on how to best minister to them. Use us in that process.

For our veterans we are grateful. We're grateful for their service and their sacrifice from a generation that understands duty, loyalty, sacrifice, commitment, and honor. Today, we honor them and give them the day.

For the mom and dad in here right now praying for a son or daughter far from you, a prodigal, I pray that they would welcome them with open arms, welcome them this holiday season, welcome them into their home, and that they would not stop praying for that day of great celebration when they turn to you. May Mom and Dad feel supported by this church in this.

For the parents who have had a prodigal return, I pray that today would be a day of rejoicing for them, that it wouldn't be time to bring up historical accounts and the list of everything that was done wrong. We pray that today they would just celebrate, knowing we get to receive others who repent as you have received us when we repented, and we're grateful for our salvation.

We pray all of this in the name of Jesus. And everyone agreed and said... Amen.