

A person is walking away from the viewer on a long, narrow wooden pier that stretches across a body of water. The sky is overcast and grey. The water is calm, reflecting the light from the sky. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

First Steps

The Father

¹¹ "There was a man who had two sons. **12** And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. **13** Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. **14** And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. **15** So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. **16** And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

17 "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! **18** I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. **19** I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'" **20** And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. **21** And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' **22** But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. **23** And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. **24** For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate.

25 "Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. **26** And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. **27** And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.' **28** But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, **29** but he answered his father, 'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. **30** But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!' **31** And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. **32** It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"

Luke15v11-32

The Father

*'The Greatest short story ever written'*¹
Charles Dickens

*"What comes in to our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us. The history of mankind will probably show that no people has ever risen above its religion, and man's spiritual history will positively demonstrate that no religion has ever been greater than it's idea of God. Worship is pure or base as the worshipper entertains high or low thoughts of God. For this reason the gravest question before the church is always God himself, and the most significant fact about any man is not what he will at a given time say or do, but what he in his heart conceives God to be like"*²
A.W. Tozer

*That is a picture of God, an old man running and so far as losing his dignity as to fall on the neck of a dishonoured lad and smother him with kisses...that is God. I dare not have drawn that picture, but Jesus did"*³
Campbell Morgan

"What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us"⁴. Now if this is true, what do you think of whenever you hear the word 'God'? Do you think of a Teacher or a Judge? Maybe the Creator of the world comes to your mind or even Sovereign Ruler? God is all of the above, but is He to be primarily known as 'creator' or 'Ruler'. Is this to be our 'first thoughts of God'? Is this who He really is in his core and his essence? It matters who we think God is. Think of some of the current views of our society, Atheism for example will tell us there is no God and that the universe has come to be through chance and the natural forces of the cosmos but that means "If the world is here by accident then the meaning of life and ultimate reality is impersonal"⁵ How cold is this, we are on our own! Eastern Philosophy on the other hand tells us that this universe is bad, the physical reality should be shunned. It was created as a result of beings expelled from the good spiritual realm to this rotten physical world. So this world was created to house the badness, How abandoned we are, God is a distant memory! Islam and Judaism tell us God is a Unipersonal God, that God is just one, single not triune. But if there is a loving unipersonal God then he would have not known love until something was created. You can't have love in a vacuum; that is frustration as you need to have something or someone to love. Not knowing love in this true sense, creation becomes something made in order to rule and dominate, and people are created not to enjoy but to serve the creator, like some Heavenly Dictator 'Big Brother'⁶. Look at the core of Islam for example, how brutal! You can submit and serve but how can we love any god like that?

Wayne Gurdem said 'to study the Bible's teachings on the trinity gives us great insight in the question of all our seeking after God: What is God like in himself?'"⁷ What he means is that to see God as Triune, not a 'simple-one'- that is, He is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, all equal in 'power, substance and glory', and yet one God- that this is core to knowing him; Why? Well, the teaching of the trinity is not some dusty doctrine that we have to believe and doesn't really mean anything. No it means this triune God is a radically different God to all others. As before being sovereign or judging or ruling or the creating of this very cosmos, there was love, a community of love, Father Son and Holy Spirit. Michael Reeves said "God has revealed himself...not first and foremost as Creator or Ruler, but Father... before He ever created, before He ever ruled the world, before anything else, this God was a Father loving his Son"⁸. This is profoundly different for two reasons.

Firstly, God is a Father first and foremost, before time or anything existed this is who He primarily is and so everything should be seen through this lens. He creates as a Father, He rules as a Father because that's who He is. This is no day job for Him, "thus all that He does he does as a Father. That is who He is"⁹. Creation then is not bad, but it is an overflow of his love, something that is positively

good! We in turn then are created because God wants us and wants us to be sons and daughters. So this is not cold, this is not abandonment, this is not brutal. This is warm, personal and inescapable love. Secondly, this means that this God knows what it is to really love, He is not some single spotty teenager who is doesn't know what it is to sacrifice and give, God is not 'curved in on Himself'¹⁰, selfish and untrained in loving. No, God is a 'Family' of loving relationship, of Father, Son and Spirit; with each person of the Trinity from all eternity not taking but giving; "God is love because God is a trinity"¹¹. This becomes inviting because God is not some Heavenly Big brother out for Himself, just to spy and be nosey but He is a Father loving his children. This is a God who I can love and He becomes more attractive as we realise that we are built to do with God what God does within himself. What I mean is that each of the divine persons does not centre on Himself, they are love and so centre on each other for their good. So if you and I are made in the image and glory of God, we are meant to put God in the centre of my life, to 'love the LORD with all my mind heart soul and strength'¹². And if I do I then enter what C.S. Lewis called 'the dance'¹³ of this triune God, this dynamic corporeal life, were we know what it is to be truly loved; to become 'in Christ', and so to be loved 'as the Father loved' Jesus, to hear those words 'this is my beloved son' spoken not only to Christ but to us. That is a God who I can love; a God who knows how to love, a true, good Father and this is the first thing that should come to our minds when we think about God.

This is how the Bible continually speaks of God, as a loving Father. **He is a Father to the Nation of Israel.** In Ex4v22-23 God says to Pharaoh 'Let my first born Son go'. God is their Father as He gave them life, He chose them¹⁴, He brought them out to freedom¹⁵, set His love upon them¹⁶, He covenanted himself to them¹⁷ to give them a 'stunning identity'¹⁸ of a firstborn son. With all the privileges of an enjoyed access to the Father¹⁹, acceptance with God, an elevated status²⁰, a double inheritance and the promise to be never cast out. A Nation brought out of slavery to sonship²¹ with God as Father! In Deut1v31 God is said to 'carry them, as a Father carries his Son'. Think how God provided for them, both food and water, he made sure their shoes and clothes did not wear out and even took sickness from them to make the journey as easy as possible. He is a Good Father who Moses says in Deut8v5 'as a man disciplines his son, the LORD your God disciplines you'. He is Good enough and strong enough to say 'no' and loving enough to enact his judgement to save them from trouble. He brought them out of slavery, and brought them into the Land as a Father. In 2Sam7 God made a covenant with King David that his lineage would forever rule; but in doing so he said 'I will be to him a father and he will be to me a son.'²² The Kings were to be a son of God, given to represent the Father, to know his mind²³ and carry out his will. Who could ever do that to full measure? Along comes Jesus, David's ancestor and God's true Son and we see now that **God is the Father of the Eternal Son, Jesus Christ.** The Jews of Jesus' day understood that God was the Father of the nation, or even the King or Prophets²⁴ could represent God to them but to say that He was their individual personal Father was tantamount to blasphemy! But this is what Jesus constantly claimed and this is why they continually took up stones to kill him. Underline the word Father in Jesus' teaching through the gospels and it is astounding how many times He is mentioned! Jesus is the perfect Son and the perfect image of the Father and so if we want to see and know God we see and know Jesus. This is the reason why Jesus came, the ultimate goal 'to bring us to God!' 'Oh come to the Father through Jesus the Son' we sometimes sing, God wants us to approach him, to know him and to have relationship with him, He wants more sons and daughters and so **God is a Father to Redeemed Humanity.** He has made creation for the purpose of having 'sons and daughters'²⁵ to pour his love upon. It should be noted that although God is, in a sense, the father of all²⁶ in that he is the creator

and sustainer of the entire cosmos this does not mean that automatically everyone in the world is related to God as Father. The Bible will teach that all are born into this world as 'children of wrath'²⁷, that our 'father is the Devil'²⁸ and that we are 'separated from God'²⁹ because of our sins. We can 'become the children of God'³⁰ by receiving Christ as our Saviour and Lord, by believing in him alone for salvation. At that moment we are 'born again'³¹ and 'adopted'³² into the 'family and household of God'³³. God becomes 'our Father'³⁴ and we have eternal life³⁵, in that we 'know the only true God'³⁶ and we live in vital relationship with Him. It is only true Christians who have 'the right to be sons of God'³⁷, to know God as Father and address Him as such. What a sheer privilege we have!

The difficulties of the word 'Father'!

In his book 'The Father heart of God'³⁸ Floyd McClung tells of a man called Steve, 'an evasive and withdrawn man' who he met in Afghanistan. One day Steve asked him if he wanted to know the happiest day of his life. He said 'It was my eleventh birthday and both my parents were killed in a car accident...they told me every day of my life that they hated me and that they didn't want me. My Father resented me and my mother continually reminded me I was an accident'. That was his happiest day, the day both his parents died. Obviously this is a hurt man, he has been alienated, he is not sure of his purpose and is seeking escape from the broken relationships that have so deeply wounded him, a man the Bible would call 'broken in spirit'³⁹. Now he was so hurt by his parents that when he heard that God is a Father, he was angry and doesn't want God. Why? Because he associates the Father with his father, he thinks that's God is someone who doesn't want him, someone who is distant and doesn't care, and someone who he should hate! It is true that our experiences in life can hurt us and wound us but can also utterly taint our view of who God really is! As a father I know that no earthly father is perfect, but we as Fathers have the awesome responsibility of representing God himself to our children, as we do Christ to our wives. I am the first to admit I don't do this the way I should at times. It is common that knowingly or unknowingly we can be tainted in the way we see God as Father⁴⁰ by our earthly fathers. Whether our fathers were **Performance based**, men who made love conditional or **Authoritarian** Fathers who Struck fear into you, a **Passive** Father who was there but not there, an **Absent** Father through death or desertion, or an **Abusive and Aggressive** Father. These types of 'fatherly care' can cause us to view God in a distorted way and can cause deep wounds that we might not even realise we have. Now I repeat no earthly Father is perfect but our heavenly father is. And the thing we have to get a whole of is that the name Father did not start with the first recorded birth, whenever Adam had Cain. Father started with God, he is the perfect we (Fathers) are the imperfect, He is the genuine and we are to be a representative of this true Father. When we get this we get freedom to forgive the imperfect earthly fathers and freedom to truly be intimate with our true and perfect heavenly Father. So how would you know what the perfect Father is truly like? Again, Jesus said 'If you have seen me you have seen the Father'. He is the 'image' of God, the 'express radiance of the father'. Jesus 'fully tells out' who the Father really is, in his actions and in his teaching. One of the parables that Jesus told gives us a window into who the Father really is. When you see his character, through this amazing picture my prayer is that you will come to experience the true fathers embrace.

The parable⁴¹

In Luke 15 we have 'the greatest short story ever told', the parable of the Prodigal Son. Although when we get to know it, we will be tempted to rename it the 'the parable of the Prodigal God'⁴² as we see the 'lavish' grace the Father gives to both sons. Jesus has been teaching the crowd, and particularly 'tax-collectors and sinners were drawing to hear him'⁴³ to hear him and so Jesus ate with them. Now "to sit down and eat with someone in the ancient Near-East was a token of acceptance"⁴⁴ and so others in the crowd, the Pharisees were outraged and they 'grumbled saying "This man receives sinners and eats with them."⁴⁵ Was their outrage justified? How could Jesus be so accepting of such sinners, did he not know the law or did he not know who God was? Well Jesus now tells this parable to combat their prejudice by showing us how lost we all really are and who God truly is! It will shock us as I am sure it shocked them to truly see the 'depth and breadth and height and length'⁴⁶ of God's love. However "Jesus' purpose is not to warm our hearts but shatter our categories"⁴⁷, if we take it seriously it will it will change us.

Chapter 15 although containing three stories is one parable⁴⁸ in three parts, and for centuries Christian teachers have seen a picture of God as trinity. The Son Shepherd, The House wife searching with a lamp is the Spirit and the Father as God the Father as one man has said "take it as a whole and we see God"⁴⁹. But for the purpose of our study we will focus on the last part of the parable (v11-32), where we will see five things about who the Father really is.

The Father is someone who has given us everything (v11-16)

Jesus starts His parable with "there was a man who had two sons" (v11). Two boys this father had clothed, he had paid for everything they had, he had fed them, he had nurtured and taught them, this Father was the author and source of their life so everything they had, they had from their father, now that should have been their philosophy of life.⁵⁰ Born into such a privilege the big question was how would they spend their life? The younger son doesn't want to spend it with the Father so he requests his share of the inheritance. This is not just bad taste it was "tantamount to saying "Dad, I wish you were dead. You are in the way of my plans. You are a barrier. I want my freedom. I want my fulfilment. And I want out of this family now"⁵¹. It was a disgrace. Look what the Father does though, instead of punishing his son, which he legally could have done, he allows him the request. Verse 12 says 'He divided his property to them', the word 'property' is actually the word 'bios' meaning 'life' as in 'biological' or 'biosphere'. The Father divided up his life. That's a powerful statement which would have baffled the Pharisees. How could the father show such grace as he would have had to liquidate his estate in order to give the son his cash, his God given inheritance, precious to every good Jew, was sold for his son. Such a sacrifice by the father, how will the sons spend their life?

You can see the raw potential of this young man, what he could achieve and how he could make a difference. The 'Jonah-est' young boy runs and runs to a far country, thinking to himself, He wants to live, he wants to be free, and he wants to be independently from his Father. He finds pleasures and laughter, but 'there he squandered his property in reckless living'. Verse 14 says 'And when he had spent everything', that is such a telling phrase; 'he had spent everything'. All the life the Father had given to him, he wasted and he lands in a pig pen not eating with the Father but with the pigs.

His potential 'wasted'! This is what it means to be lost, to live independently from God, to say in the heart 'my will not thy will'!

Life is a gift, given by God. He is a Father that has shared His life with us and has given us talents, abilities and opportunities in order to invest this life in the right things⁵². If God is the author and source of all life, even our life, then to live our life with him and for him is the true rational and reasonable choice is it not? You are made by the Father, for the Father so spend your life with him! Cars are made for the road but if you try to drive through a lake because you want freedom from the directions, you will find a wet soggy ending. It wasn't made for water. You are not made to live independently from God, that is not freedom, but your life is given to you so you can know God, so that you can have a relationship with the Father, this is true freedom and true living! Both boys were given life and the older brother is not blameless, he was given the same privilege, but he spent his life in the field, seemingly working for the Father, but never really knowing the Father. That is as much, if not a greater waste of a life. It is only when we see that the Father is our source of our life and has given us everything that we will start to see his great love and his brilliance in creation. Hear David as it dawns on him that the world was created so that God to know mankind, he bows in worship and says "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?"⁵³ The God who has given life is the loving Father who is looking sons and daughters. Look at how much he has given, time is short, we are to 'redeem the time'. Our lives down here are a blink; we are to live for what is eternal, to spend our life on what will give greatest eternal gain in knowing the Father. 'If this life is a journey then every step on the way has eternal significance and meaning'. Let's invest what the Father has graciously given, our abilities and gifts to know him, to know what it is not to eat pig food but to 'eat with the Father' and to become like him. This is the greatest investment ever.

The Father is someone who loves unconditionally (v17-20)

The boy 'comes to himself'(15v17) and he starts to think clearly for the first time in years. Pleasure has left him and emptiness remains, friends have left him and loneliness is present, food is no more to be replaced by a famine, but sense comes to him. 'Even the servants are better off than me, what am I doing?' You can get a sense of the argument going on in his head, the almost unbelief of where he has ended. That is the subtlety of sin, that it will always take you further than you want to go. He repents, He has 'sinned against heaven and his Father' (15v18, 19) and he sets himself to sort it out. He gets up and starts the journey home, rehearsing over and over what he would say to the Father but coming over the brow of the hill 'while he was still a long way off, his father saw him, and felt compassion, and ran, and embraced him and kissed him' (15v20). At this point I can feel every Pharisee within the sound of the Lord's voice recoil within themselves as they think about this father of nobility running toward his son, not to strike him and punish him⁵⁴, but to embrace and kiss the pig covered repentant boy. Why does the father do this? 'He felt compassion' says Jesus. How wonderful. The Father loves the son, no matter what he had done; he was just delighted to be with him again, his son that was lost and dead is now found and alive. This is unconditional love, this is God's love, and this is a true Father. God loves his creation⁵⁵ and the people of that creation⁵⁶, but exclusively and absorbedly he loves unconditionally his chosen⁵⁷ sons and daughters⁵⁸. This love is undeserved, the boy had squandered all and wasted the life the Father had given to him, what the

boy deserved was death, what he got was the Father's love and affection. Surely he would have to earn back the father's love, that's what the son thought and definitely what the Pharisees were thinking, but no, that is not who the Father is.

Why does God love us so? The simple and yet profound answer is that 'He loves us because he loves us'. This is what God has chosen to do. If you are a Christian, God has set his love upon you, he has chosen to love you and that's the end of the matter. In talking to his son Israel God says 'I did not set my affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you'. He loved them because he loved them, and he loves us because he loves us. 'God is love' says John, this means this is who God really is in himself, never to diminish or change so "Love is not something the Father has merely one of his many moods. Rather, He is love. He could not, not love. If He did not love, He would not be Father"⁵⁹. God is love, with all of who God is he loves so as Tozer said "Because God is *self-existent*, His love had no beginning; because He is *eternal*, His love can have no end; because He is *infinite*, it has no limit; because He is *holy*, it is the quintessence of all spotless purity; because He is *immense*, His love is an incomprehensibly vast, bottomless, shoeless sea"⁶⁰. How mighty!

The Father's love for the boy is seen not just in his embrace, but right through the story. He was loving him when he let him go, he was loving him when he was allowing him to hit rock bottom, he was committed to the son to bring him back, that is why he let him go even though it cost him to do so, see him waiting everyday looking for his lost son. He involves himself and binds himself to the boy's condition, identifying with him and his welfare and so the son's grief becomes the father's grief, the son's pain becomes the father's pain. This is a mighty investment that the father made, he doesn't forget the son, or right him off as damaged but he is committed to him. This is what we find of God's attitude to his children that "God has voluntarily bound up his own final happiness with ours...God's happiness will not be complete till all his beloved ones are finally out of trouble"⁶¹. God has covenanted to us and will as a good father discipline us and let us hit rock bottom when we need it, 'my son...for the Lord disciplines the one he loves'. What Father doesn't want his children to know growth and maturity? This is what we learn in times of discipline and this is what the son learnt in the far land. The Father is faithful and will never leave us, 'For He God himself has said 'I will not in any way fail you, nor give you up, nor leave you without support; I will not, I will not, I will not in any degree leave you helpless, let you down, relax my hold on you, assuredly not'⁶².

Sometimes in the hard times and storms of life we can doubt this love and like Peter we cry out 'Do you not care for us?'⁶³ Paul is a realist in Romans 5:1-11 he talks of these tribulations and God's response to them, to through his Spirit 'pour into hearts God's love for us'; he will by his power so overwhelm us with his love by the ultimate Display of His love and proof to us that the Father loves us unconditionally, when 'God demonstrated his love for us, in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us'. Jesus, the Word⁶⁴, who fully tells out the Father⁶⁵ bled and died at Calvary's cross for all the runaway sons and daughters of this world. So Paul says 'But God being rich in mercy because of his great love with which he loved us'⁶⁶ has lifted us through the death burial and resurrection of Jesus. John says 'God is Love....and sent his son to be an atoning sacrifice for our sins' and Jesus himself said 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son'⁶⁷. This is how we are assured of God's love, the Cross! 'To know God's love is indeed heaven on earth'⁶⁸ this is why Paul prays that we might be 'strengthened in the inner man that we might comprehend with all saints what is the height and depth and breadth and length of the love of God in Christ Jesus'. This love is so great that we need to be strengthened to understand it and to perceive ourselves in its never

ending theme. You and I are greatly loved and we need to know this deep within us because 'the answer to our independence is unconditional love'. This is what broke the boy, the knowledge of the father's house and unconditional love. How can we resist this kind of love that pursues us so that we are overwhelmed by the grace, mercy and sheer love of God in Jesus Christ; Paul says 'the Son of God who loved ME and gave himself for ME⁶⁹', how amazing to claim what Paul claimed for ourselves. It is only when we see the extent of the love the father has for us and then abide⁷⁰ in such love and keep ourselves⁷¹ in the love of God by preaching it to ourselves and declaring it that we truly enjoy our sonship and daughterhood and "and this will heal all the diseases of my soul."⁷² This is what our father wants, to 'eat with us'⁷³.

The Father is someone who bears our shame (v20)

The Son had shamed the Father by asking for his inheritance now, to which the Father relented and let the Son depart ensuing further shame upon himself. "Any Father with a proper concern about the honour of his own name and the reputation of the family would now see to it that a boy like this received the full and just deserts of all his transgressions"⁷⁴. This is what the crowd expected; in a this culture "it would be nothing if the father simply refused to meet the boy face-to-face. In fact even if the father were inclined to grant the penitent son an audience, it would be typical to punish him by making a public spectacle of his shame"⁷⁵ sometimes letting the boy be tied in the public square of the village for all to taunt and for him to feel his shame. It certainly would be unthinkable for the Father to offer the Son forgiveness and status in an immediate fashion. That is not who God is though. At first sight of the boy, the father breaks out into sprint and runs for all he is worth to get to his repentant son. This would have been a highly shameful thing for the father to do, children ran or servants ran on errands but older dignified noblemen did not run. He brings shame upon himself, why would he do that? Why not just walk towards the boy in a dignified manor why does he run towards the boy? Well the text says he 'saw him and felt compassion', he was overcome with love no matter what the son had done because he loved him unconditionally. And out of that love he found himself on the move towards him. But there is a second reason, "The father clearly wanted to reach the Prodigal before the boy got to the village- apparently to protect him from the outpouring of scorn he would have received if he had walked through the village unreconciled with his father. The father would bear the shame and take the abuse instead"⁷⁶. That public taunting and shame in the square, the father would get to him first. Before anybody and save him from it!

We don't have to think too far till we see the full ramifications of this kind of gracious treatment. How many of our sins could the father have dragged us into the town centre and nailed to the wall, could we find a wall big enough? How mighty it is that His Son, Jesus Christ –who fully displays the Father- came to this world and was uncovered in shame, crucified naked, mocked and taunted as people walked by, openly shamed so we can know 'the blessedness or sheer 'fist-pump happiness' of sins covered'⁷⁷. He 'despised the shame'⁷⁸ so we can know what it is to be 'covered in the fathers robe'; how loving a Father, how mighty a work on Calvary, that we don't need to carry our shame, He has taken it for us!

*'Bearing Shame and scoffing rude
In my place condemned he stood
Sealed my pardon with his blood
Hallelujah, what a Saviour'⁷⁹*

What is God like, what is a good “picture of God, an old man running and so far as losing his dignity as to fall on the neck of a dishonoured lad and smother him with kisses...that is God. I dare not have drawn that picture, but Jesus did”⁸⁰. He has saved us from shame, praise him!

The Father is someone who wants us not our service (v21-32)

The father not only embraces and kisses the younger brother but proceeds to shower him in gifts. He robes him, covering his dirt and shame. He puts a ring on his finger; this would have meant he now had the same authority as a son. In those days they didn't sign papers to make contracts; they had a signet ring, with the crest of the family. So the son is given this. He puts shoes on his feet; this is a symbol of sonship. He kills the fatted calf. He celebrates, that is the Father celebrates with the son, 'let **us** eat'; he doesn't arrange the feast and let the boy to it with his friends, he celebrates with the son!

Now look at the elder brother reaction when he hears all of what has happened 'he was angry and refused to go in'. Very much like the Pharisee's earlier were they 'grumbled saying "this man receives sinners and **eats with them**"' (15v2). The older brother doesn't get it, he doesn't understand the Father and ultimately he has worked all his life on the father estate and doesn't know him. He like the younger brother⁸¹ they think that the way to earn the fathers favour is through serving him; 'all these years I have served you' (15v29) he says. And because he thinks this way he despises the younger brother and wants him punished for his crimes instead of rejoicing that he is found and alive. You get the sense he would rather him dead and lost, look at how he talks 'this son of yours', not even acknowledging that his is his brother. This is the Pharisee's attitude to these tax collectors and sinners. They just don't know the father. They had their chapters and verses as had the son, to why the younger brother should be punished, but they just don't get grace. 'Elder brother disease'⁸² is rampant in the church nowadays. People that serve the father, work for him but have no real knowledge of him. They believe that Jesus has died for them and risen, they will amen it all, but they really think their relationship with the Father is based on their own effort. I find this in my own heart sometimes; I will get through a week and lived 'well' and I expect God to bless me, you know, because I have earned it and he owes me! Is that really what the Father wants from us, our service or our works? No, a thousand times NO!!! Why did God make the world, so he could have slaves or sons? Why did Jesus died on the cross for us, so he could have religious duty or true relationship? Did the younger son deserve it? Did he earn in anyway his father's favour? No, but the Father gives him all! We can't earn the fathers favour we are too wrecked. But the fathers favour is already on us! If we have trusted in the Lord Jesus we are 'accepted in the beloved'. We can be anymore accepted or any less accepted, even if we have a good week or bad week, we are accepted that's what God says!

Now what does God want from us? He wants to 'eat with us'. Think of the amount of times in the New Testament Jesus eats with people, all sorts of people in all sorts of houses. Why, well this is what God loves to do, to share life with people. Think back to Eden, where he 'walked with Adam in the cool of the day'; a lot of commentators this this was near the end of the day were they shared a meal. Talking, enjoying each other, laughing and learning about each other. This is not how we think

of God, but this is what we see time and again in the Life of Jesus. Think of Mary and Martha, all Jesus wanted was time with them, not their service but them. Think of the ancient Aaronic blessing

“The Lord bless you and keep you,
the LORD *make his face to shine upon you* and be gracious to you,
the LORD *lift up his countenance upon you* and give you peace”⁸³

What is this but the living God wanting face to face communion and relationship with his children? It is what he wants; it is what he has always wanted! This is not cheap grace, it is true grace and it cost the Lord everything and if we get it in our souls and see who we truly are and who the father truly is that changes everything.

The Father is someone who killed the fatted calf for us (v25-32)

You might be thinking a similar vain to the Pharisee’s, how can the father actually do this? That’s a lovely story, but what about justice, the law demands some sort of punishment⁸⁴, what about ‘whatever a man sows he reaps?’ if the father lets him off the hook what does that actually say about the father?’ Does the elder brother and do the Pharisees have a case? Firstly, it is important to see that the younger brother repents truly and “repentance is a healthy thing. Like rain which softens the earth and allows seeds to germinate and grow, so repentance opens the way to spiritual life”⁸⁵ Secondly in an amazing way the elder brother stumbles upon the answer when he says “you killed that fatted calf for him”⁸⁶. The father did not let the boy off Scott free, no to forgive the boy and bring him back in to all the manifold blessings that the father gave cost the father. He sacrificed the fatted calf, not just in celebration, but in a sort of atonement. Forgiveness always costs as you see in the parable our Lord Jesus taught in Matt18v21-35, the king to mercy on him but it cost him to the sum of ten thousand talents. Here the father ‘kills the fatted calf FOR HIM’ that is in his place. The boy according to the law should have died; ‘anyone who curses his parent, put to death’⁸⁷ said Leviticus or “This son of ours is stubborn and a drunkard. Then the men of his town are to stone him to death”⁸⁸ said Deuteronomy. The boy should have died as a result of his shameful treatment of his father, but the costly, prized, fatted calf died in his place! Justice is satisfied, death happened! What an amazing picture as Campbell Morgan asks “Isn’t there another son? Yes there is, he is the man who was uttering the parable. He was Gods Son, his ideal Son on the human level. He never broke Gods heart with his sin, but he was so in sympathy with Gods heart that he died to save sinners”⁸⁹. God gave his Son for runaway sons. He got the rejection, so we can get the welcome; he was stripped so we could be clothed with the Fathers robe; he got the vinegar so we could get the feast of the fatted calf; he got the sorrow, so we could celebrate with the father; he was struck by brutal soldiers so we could be embraced and kissed by a loving father; His call received no answer, so when we call God will answer, He was abandoned by the father so that we can be adopted but him. Can you see it, God is on us falling on our neck, he is robing us covering our sin and shame, he is feasting us wanting relationship and joy and kissing us showing us his approval and acceptance!

Conclusion- A waiting Father

Floyd Mclung tells of a young man named Sawat from a country Taiwanese village who left home and disgraced his parents. He ventured to Bangkok where he ‘was caught up like a small piece of

wood in a raging river' in the sex trade, selling opium and propositioning tourists and even buying and selling young girls. The bottom fell out for this high powered business man and he found himself in a shanty by the city rubbish dump. Sitting in his shack he remembered the parting words of his father, a simple Christian: "I am waiting for you". He wrote to his father 'Dear Father, I want to come home if you will receive me after all that I have done. I have sinned greatly, father please forgive me. on Saturday night I will be on the train which goes through our village. If you are still waiting for me will you tie a piece of cloth on the Po tree in front of our house?' On the train he thought through his life and was filled with anxiety as he drew near to his home village. A fellow passenger sitting opposite him noticing his discomfort and asked if he was ok? Sawat blurted out the whole story and buried his head between his knees 'Do you see it sir? It's the only house with a Po tree.' he said to the man. 'Young man, your father did not hang one piece of cloth...look! he covered the whole tree with pieces of cloth!' he could hardly believe his eyes, the whole tree was covered in white cloth with his father in the garden waving a white cloth jumping up and down for joy. His father ran beside the train and when it stopped at the little station he threw his arms around the son, embracing him with tears of joy. 'I've been waiting for you,' he exclaimed!

A modern prodigal! The Father is waiting, he always has been! You might need to repent of how you have seen God? You might be far from the Lord in your life or in your heart. Come to our senses and come to the LORD our great, loving Father. This is who the father really is, this is what should come to you mind when you think of God and all he wants to do is 'eat' with you, to have that true and intimate relationship with you. I pray that you may come to now the father more and be overwhelmed by his love for you!

END NOTES:

- ¹ Quoted in John MacArthur 'The Prodigal Son' Thomas Nelson 2008 Pg3
- ² A.W. Tozer 'The Knowledge of the Holy' O.M. Publishing Pg11
- ³ Campbell Morgan 'The Gospel of Luke' Pg183
- ⁴ A.W. Tozer 'The Knowledge of the Holy' O.M. Publishing Pg11
- ⁵ Tim Keller 'Prodigal God' Hodder and Stoughton Ltd Pg
- ⁶ Christopher Hitchens 'God is not Great'
- ⁷ Wayne Grudem 'Systematic Theology- An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine' IVP; Pg226
- ⁸ Michael Reeves 'The Good God; Enjoying Father, Son and Holy Spirit' 2012. Pg3
- ⁹ Ibid Pg5
- ¹⁰ Martin Luther
- ¹¹ Michael Reeves 'The Good God; Enjoying Father, Son and Holy Spirit' 2012. Pgvii
- ¹² Deut6
- ¹³ C.S. Lewis 'Mere Christianity' Pg
- ¹⁴ Deut 7v6-11
- ¹⁵ Ex1-15 Bringing them out of Egypt from the bondage of Pharaoh
- ¹⁶ Deut7v8
- ¹⁷ Ex19-24 The Old Covenant as it is known
- ¹⁸ Walter Brueggemann, Exodus, NIBC (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994) Pg717
- ¹⁹ Tabernacle system 'worship me' Ex4v23
- ²⁰ Nation of Privilege –Rom 3 having the 'oracles of God'
- ²¹ Rom9v4, Deut32v6, 18, Hos11v1, Jer31v20 "God gave birth to the nation through his saving act, thereby establishing the father-son relationship with Israel" R. Alan Culpepper, 'Children of God', NIDB vol.1, A-C, Pg590-quoted Trevor Burke 'the Message of Sonship, The Bible speaks today, Bible Themes' IVP,Pg43
- ²² 2Sam7v14
- ²³ The kings were to write out their own copy of the law and keep it with them always Deut17
- ²⁴ John10
- ²⁵ Eph1v5-6, comp Eph2v1-10
- ²⁶ James1v17; Acts17v29
- ²⁷ Eph2v3
- ²⁸ John8v44
- ²⁹ Isa59v1-2
- ³⁰ John1v12
- ³¹ John1v12-13, 3v1-16
- ³² Gal4v1-7; Rom8v12-17
- ³³ Eph3v14-19
- ³⁴ Matt6v9, Luke11v3
- ³⁵ John17v3
- ³⁶ John17v3
- ³⁷ Jon1v12
- ³⁸ Floyd McClung 'The Father Heart of God, what is God really like? Kingsway Publisher. Pg13-14
- ³⁹ Prov15v13, 18v14
- ⁴⁰ Taken from David Legge sermon entitled "Fathers wounds"
- ⁴¹ A parable is an earthly story told to teach divine truth, from the word 'parabolos' meaning to set beside!
- ⁴² Title of Tim Kellers Book, noted by Campbell Morgan
- ⁴³ Luke15v1

- ⁴⁴ Tim Keller 'Prodigal God' Hodder and Stoughton Ltd Pg9
- ⁴⁵ Luke15v2
- ⁴⁶ Eph3v18
- ⁴⁷ Tim Keller 'Prodigal God' Hodder and Stoughton Ltd Pg10
- ⁴⁸ Luke 15v3 notice the singular 'this parable' not 'parables'. "They constitute a 'triptych'; they are linked up to each other...the old fathers declared emphatically that this is one parable in three movements" Morgan Pg180
- ⁴⁹ Campbell Morgan 'The Gospel of Luke' Pg181
- ⁵⁰ Campbell Morgan 'The Gospel of Luke' Pg183
- ⁵¹ John MacArthur 'The Prodigal Son' Thomas Nelson 2008 Pg45
- ⁵² Parable of the talents
- ⁵³ Ps8v1, 3-4
- ⁵⁴ Deut21v18-21
- ⁵⁵ Gen1-2 'good'; Matt6v26;10v29
- ⁵⁶ John3v16, 1John2v2
- ⁵⁷ Israel as an example Deut7v7-8 comp 4v37; 10v14-15; Mal1v2-3;
- ⁵⁸ Eph1v5,6; 5v1,25; John17v23-26
- ⁵⁹ Michael Reeves 'The Good God; Enjoying Father, Son and Holy Spirit' 2012. Pg8
- ⁶⁰ A.W. Tozer 'The Knowledge of the Holy' quoted Hughes 'Preaching The Word, Luke, That you may know the Truth' Crossway Pg573
- ⁶¹ J.I. Packer 'Knowing God' Hodder & Stoughton 2004 Pg141
- ⁶² Heb13v5 Amp version
- ⁶³ Mark4v38
- ⁶⁴ John1v1, 14
- ⁶⁵ John1v18, 14v9
- ⁶⁶ Eph2v1-10
- ⁶⁷ John3v16
- ⁶⁸ J.I. Packer 'Knowing God' Hodder & Stoughton 2004 Pg132
- ⁶⁹ Gal2v20
- ⁷⁰ John15v9
- ⁷¹ Jude24
- ⁷² Augustine 'Confessions'
- ⁷³ Rev3v20, Num6v24-26, 1Cor11v17-34
- ⁷⁴ John MacArthur 'The Prodigal Son' Thomas Nelson 2008 Pg105
- ⁷⁵ John MacArthur 'The Prodigal Son' Thomas Nelson 2008 Pg108
- ⁷⁶ John MacArthur 'The Prodigal Son' Thomas Nelson 2008 Pg113
- ⁷⁷ Rom4v8
- ⁷⁸ Heb12v2
- ⁷⁹ Phillip Paul Bliss (1838-76)
- ⁸⁰ Campbell Morgan 'The Gospel of Luke' Pg183
- ⁸¹ Lk15v19
- ⁸² David Legge, Sermon title
- ⁸³ Num6v24-26
- ⁸⁴ Lev20v9 'anyone who curses his parent, put to death' or Deut 21v18-21 "This son of ours is stubborn and a drunkard. Then the men of his town are to stone him to death"
- ⁸⁵ David Gooding & John Lennox 'Key Bible Concepts' 2007 Myrtlefield Trust Pg67
- ⁸⁶ Luke15v30
- ⁸⁷ Lev20v9

⁸⁸ Deut21v18-21

⁸⁹ Campbell Morgan 'The Gospel of Luke' Pg184