

Coming Home

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The last time I wrote to you, we discussed Christian life in a university environment as it is officially described: a place of learning and scholarship. This month, I thought we might consider college life as it is often unofficially known: wild parties, drunken antics, and lewd behavior. Just think of the movie *Animal House* or *Van Wilder*. Now don't get the idea that this is going to be some stern, self-righteous lecture. It's not. As much as I'd like to tell you that I have always been some paragon of faith and virtue, that's just not true. You should have seen my college years!

Around the time most people are going to college, a number of factors converge. You're beginning to become independent from your parents. Around this time, you start a career, or at least seriously prepare for one. You move out of your parents' house and start to make your own way in the world. This is also a time when it is perfectly natural and often necessary to reconsider the things that you were taught when you were younger. It's a great time to explore new ideas and have new experiences. At the same time, you are surrounded by other young people in the same boat, you have unprecedented autonomy, and you may have found that opportunities to get into trouble are easy to find. Again, just think *Animal House*.

We all make mistakes here and there, and I think we all know what to do when we fall short of God's standards during our daily life. But what if we take a long walk on the wild side? That's what happened to me: when I went off to college, I left the faith community and didn't come back for a long while. What then? In Luke 15:11-32, Christ taught on that very subject using a parable known as "The Prodigal Son." It starts with a son who asks his father to give

him his inheritance so that he can strike off on his own. Now this is a pretty obnoxious request; essentially he's saying he doesn't want to have to wait around for his father to die to get the estate. Instead he wants it now. But the father loves his son and is unwilling to force him to stay, so he grants the request even though I am sure it breaks his heart. Soon after, the son travels away and parties hard until the money is all gone. Then times get tough, and the son gets a job feeding pigs. Presumably, the young man is Jewish so for him to have to tend pigs would have been a humiliating job. But even then, he doesn't have enough to eat and he yearns to eat the food he has to feed another man's pigs. He's starving and no one will help him.

My own experience was very similar in a spiritual, rather than financial, sense. I stopped listening to God and did things my own way. And for a while, various distractions provided amusement. The catch is that after every hedonistic indulgence was over, I felt a little empty inside. And every time I repeated the experience, in the short term it might be fun, but then long-term that empty feeling would return even worse than before. Continue that long enough and I can tell you from experience that you become spiritually bankrupt, consumed with an overwhelming emptiness. One day I realized that I was spiritually starving to death!

Returning to the parable, when the son reaches this point he makes a decision. He remembers how even his father's servants have food to spare and he decides to return home. He plans to approach his father and say that he is unworthy to be considered his child any longer, but instead wants to be made one of his servants. Notice the doubt in the son's mind. He cannot bring himself to believe that his father would take him back after all that he has done, except perhaps as a servant. This is all he hopes for. And so he returns home.

We are then told that the father sees the son while he is yet far in the distance and filled with compassion, he runs to his son, embraces him and kisses him. The son then tells his father that he is unworthy to be called his child. He doesn't get any farther than that into the speech he

rehearsed before his father addresses his servants, telling them to clothe the son in the best robe, to put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. He then gives instructions to prepare a grand feast; his son has come back - it's time to celebrate! Taken at face value, it is clear that the father has been waiting and hoping for his son to change his mind, and that he is overjoyed to have him back. And you certainly get the impression that the son has been in his father's thoughts since the moment he left.

But there is more here than meets the eye. It was common in the ancient world for men of importance, that is wealth or status, to move slowly. The higher your status, the more slowly you might move. They never ran; others ran for them or to them. It was a subtle way of saying "A man in my position doesn't hurry; others hurry for me." For a man of wealth or status (like the father in the story) to run would have been a humiliation. This father doesn't care; he is going to get to his son as fast as he can, even if he has to publicly embarrass himself to do it! According to ancient sensibilities, the moment of their meeting would also have been an opportunity to hear out the son's admission of wrongdoing and to chastise him before showing mercy. Again, it's a status thing. But the father cuts the son's plea short, uninterested in his right to say "See I told you so."

The father's subsequent instructions to adorn the son with the best robe, a ring, and sandals are also meaningful. The fine garments are a sign of honor and status. The ring is perhaps even more so, since it was common in those days for rings worn by family-members-in-good-standing to bear the family seal, symbolizing the authority of the wearer to speak and act for the family. The sandals are special in that servants could be distinguished from their masters by the fact that the masters wore shoes; the servants didn't. Everything the father is doing here communicates that this man is NOT a servant. This man is his son and his position in the family is restored entirely. No half measures, no grudges, no qualifications, no conditions - the father's

forgiveness is utter and complete, and he is overjoyed to have his son back. Finally we are told that the brother, the son that didn't rebel or leave home got a little jealous. I guess that's to be expected, but that doesn't change the fact that his brother has returned and his father's decision is made: ALL is forgiven.

I hope that I have wasted my time in writing this letter to you. I hope that neither you, nor anyone you know, are in the position of a prodigal son. But if you are, let me assure you of this: Regardless of what others may think, despite any whispers in your mind that say "You can't go back. It's been too long. You've gone too far. You've done too much.", I am confident that you will find God just as I did: waiting with open arms. You'll find him ready to run to you, ready to wrap you in the most loving embrace you will ever know, crying with joy and ready to forgive everything you've done. And I am sure He will tell you what He told me: Welcome home!