

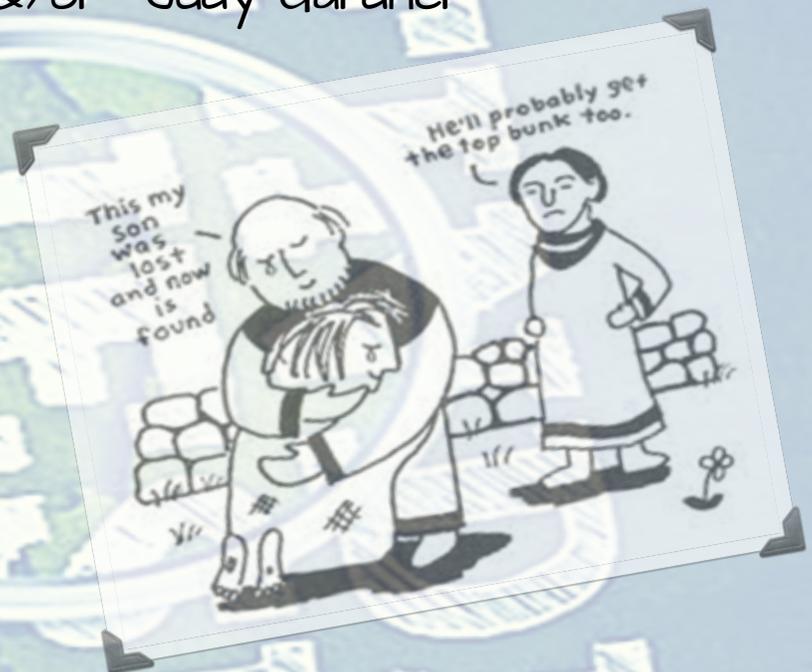
September 6-10, 2021 Edition

The "BIG Story" Of The Bible #65

The Prodigal Family?

By: Ed &/or Judy Gardner

September 4/5, 2021



When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well you knew the rest ;D) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday Reflection: This week we're going to be looking at the parable of the Prodigal Son, maybe the most famous story ever told. But before we dig in to this story, let's talk about parables. Parables were stories that illustrated the teachings of Jesus. His teaching was the most amazing the world has ever seen, but sometimes we hear great teaching and still leave scratching our heads. What does that mean? So I should love, accept and forgive... what does that look like? I don't know about you... teaching doesn't always really sink in with just one lesson. Sometimes I need a refresher course. And so Jesus told us what it would look like to live the blessed life and then He showed us, guided us, and even told us stories that illustrated what that life would look like.

We call these stories parables. They were a way of really driving home a point Jesus wanted us to get. And not long after His death, burial & resurrection the people who decided to give life lived His way a shot started a movement... a movement that Jesus instructed them to start. Maybe you've heard of this movement- it's called the church. And this brand new movement embraced the teachings Jesus taught... they embraced the concepts He illustrated through His parables. And it was unlike anything that had ever been seen before. This movement was not based on what people could do for God... but how God did everything for us and all we had to do was accept His gift.

The Romans had no way of explaining this new movement. Because every other religious movement was based on rule keeping & ritual observance in order to please the gods. But this new religion seemed to be for everyone... even those who could do nothing for their God. And this radical teaching is illustrated maybe the most clearly in Luke 15. Here's the setting:

Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach. This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that he was associating with such sinful people-even eating with them! Luke 15:1-2 (NLT)

Now knowing the audience is critical for this particular story because this is a powder-keg moment. So we'll keep in mind there are three groups of people. There is Jesus, and then there are these people who are kind of obvious sinners, spiritual losers. Then there are the Pharisees, the teachers of the law, religious leaders.

The verbs really tell the story. Jesus is teaching. The sinners are gathering. The Pharisees are muttering. "This Man." They can't even bring themselves to say His name. "This Man, Jesus. He has no standards. Water down the faith. He'll take anybody in." So this is a very tense, very explosive, in-your-face kind of moment... and Jesus knows what He's doing here... His words are chosen very carefully and everybody is watching to see how will Jesus respond to this criticism from these very powerful people? Maybe He'll be a little apologetic. Maybe He'll back off the "friend of sinners" deal.

Then He tells 2 stories... one about a lost coin and the other about a lost sheep. In both stories someone loses something incredibly valuable to them and moves Heaven and earth to find what they lost. Jesus is being kind of confrontational here. Everyone knows what He's saying. The sinners hear these stories and they say, that's me... I'm the lost sheep... I'm the lost coin. Jesus is in essence saying, not only am I not backing off the friend of sinners thing... I'm telling you that what you're seeing right here and right now is the work that God gave me to do. And that's

pretty bold but it's nothing compared to what's coming... tomorrow we'll start looking at the story He tells about a lost son... but this story is different than any other He's ever told. I can't wait!

Tuesday Reflection: Ok... so Jesus is standing before a crowd that basically breaks down into 3 groups: the notorious sinners who know how far from God they are, the holier-than-thou Pharisees who are just as far from God (and maybe farther) but don't realize it, and God (Jesus... but you know... the whole Trinity thing). He has been criticized for accepting the sinners and everyone is wondering how He'll handle it. Will He back off His teaching that the Father loves and forgives these wanton sinners? So He tells a story... it begins like this:

There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living. Luke 15:11-13 (NIV)

Now this story is often called the prodigal son and messages on this story usually focus on him... the younger son. But the younger son wasn't the only "prodigal" one in this story. In fact, all three of the characters could be labelled as "prodigal". Prodigal is defined as the relentlessly reckless, extravagant wastefulness of a resource. Sort of like you're just throwing it away. And I'm hoping that by the time we're done you'll notice that all three of these guys are prodigals. Because what we find here is that not just one boy rebelled but both... one by being very bad... the other by being very good.

See, one of the things that shows how much of a genius Jesus was in His story telling ability is that when we hear one of His stories we irresistibly find ourselves identifying with one of the characters. And one of the ways you can really learn a lot about yourself is to reflect on which characters you find yourself identifying with in any given story. So this audience would have been stunned by the idea that the younger son would ask such a thing. It would have been unthinkable. And he doesn't ask for his inheritance. Inheritance had within it the idea of responsibility of helping run the family estate. He wants none of that. He wants his share of the loot and then he's out of there. It's like the son saying to the dad... I wish you were dead so badly I can't wait for the actual event so I'm going to do something so hurtful that I'll be able to live the rest of my life as though you really are dead. It would have crushed his dad.

Now the younger son's portion would have been 1/3 of the estate. The older brother got 2/3. And dad wouldn't have had the cash laying around... he would have had to liquidate assets to make it happen. And what was even more unthinkable than the son asking was that the father agrees. And we see the nature of God... Who let's His children decide for themselves whether they will live in relationship with Him or reject Him. But I guarantee you that everyone in the crowd would have gasped when Jesus said that the Father granted the younger son's request. Nobody (sinner or Pharisee) saw that coming. It was the most humiliating thing a son could do to his father, but the father does what the boy asks.

So the father gives the younger son his share... and the young son goes as far away as he can get from his father. And he spends it all on what Luke calls "wild living". No real explanation of what that was. Basically he went and did everything that was against the rules at home...

everything that represented freedom to him. But as always eventually happens with that kind of life, the day comes when the very thing that represents freedom to him enslaves him, and the thing that seemed to restrictive and enslaving suddenly looks a whole lot like freedom. That's when the hard times hit. He can't get a job... he has no money, no food. He ends up feeding pigs (which is as low as a Jewish boy could get) and is so hungry he wishes he could eat the slop he's serving the pigs. And that's when Jesus says, he came to his senses.

About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. The young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything. When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, 'At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger! Luke 15:14-19 (NLT)

It's amazing, isn't it... that pain can be such an amazing professor in our lives. Think about how many times in your life you ran into God's arms because of pain. And yet if you're like me... you try to shield your kids from pain. But God doesn't do that. He let's us experience our pain. In the younger son's pain he comes to his senses and hatches a plan. He decides he'll go home and beg his father to take him back... but not as a son... as a servant. He practices his speech and it goes like this:

I will go home to my father and say, "Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant." Luke 15:14-19 (NLT)

Now Jesus' listeners would have thought this was a fitting ending to the story. The kid was humbled, humiliated and so we can be done. They didn't need to hear about the encounter between the Father & the son because everyone knows it will never actually take place (at least that's what they assume... more on that later). What matters is that the boy learns about what happens when someone dishonors their father and their community. What matters is that he is left with nothing and no one. Because that would be fair. They thought relationship was something you earn but Jesus says, life with the Father isn't about fair... it's about Grace and mercy and so the story doesn't end there. There's another twist... another shock coming to everyone.

So the boy starts making his way home. Now the people listening to Jesus would know something that you and I don't unless we've done some studying about first century Jewish customs... it was a ceremony called kezazah. The word in Hebrew meant broken and the ceremony went like this: If a boy took his inheritance and squandered it among the gentiles instead of spending it in Israel where the Jewish people would benefit then he was never supposed to come back. And if he tried and anyone found out then the elders of the town would come to him as he tried to enter the town and they would take a pot and they would break it right in front of him. And that act would banish the man from the town and his family forever. It was their way of saying, what you did broke trust, family, community & relationship and you are no longer welcome here. It happened all the time. But this was a unique situation. Nobody had ever heard of anything quite like this. A father who gave his rotten son the

inheritance BEFORE he had died? What will happen in this case? Will dad break the pot? Will he give that honor to the older son? What do you think he'll do? We'll focus on that tomorrow.

Wednesday Reflection: Ok... so the younger son is on his way home. In ordinary circumstances (where the boy has squandered his father's inheritance AFTER his death) the elders of the town would enact, "kezazah", a symbolic act where a pot would be broken in front of the boy demonstrating the broken relationship & faith between the boy and the community. The boy would never be allowed to return to his home town after that ritual. Everyone in the crowd must have been wondering, "who will get to break the pot?" Dad? The older brother? Or the elders of the town? Probably whoever sees him first. But they never get to find out because there's one thing that nobody was counting on... not the younger son, not the older son, not the town... not the people listening to Jesus' story... and you can bet there were people in that audience that day who had broken trust, faith and relationship with their community and knew that if they ever tried to go home they would be met at the gates of their town with a broken pot... they would be kezazah. But the boy isn't even home yet when his dad sees him from a long distance. And dad doesn't wait for him to get home... HE RUNS TO MEET HIM.

So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. His son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son." Luke 15:20-21 (NLT)

Jesus uses a word here that means he sprinted. Not something that a man of dignity and authority would ever do. Now I tried this week to think of how to explain this. What this would have been like. When I was younger there was an actor named John Wayne... the Duke. And he was cool. He had this strut when he walked... he never ran. I read once that he saw himself walking on an early movie he did and cringed so he practiced that walk in the mirror. I tried to imitate his walk this week so I could show you what it looked like but I did not look cool... I looked pretty stupid so I'm not going to show you. But John Wayne didn't run. Strong men of dignity do not run.

But this father does it... why? I think he couldn't stop thinking about his boy and what would happen if he didn't get to him first. Before the town elders got to him and broke the pot. "If I don't get to him first maybe he'll never get to come home," and the father is unwilling to let that happen so he runs. And the people listening to Jesus' story know what shame and humiliation the father was taking on himself so the boy could come home. He's already been humiliated by the boy leaving... now he's humiliating himself again. And it's actually kind of a picture of where Jesus' life is heading. Because when He hangs on that cross God takes that shame and humiliation that are rightfully ours so that we can have the possibility of coming home in spite of our brokenness. In spite of our lives that so often humiliate our Father.

That father does what no father would do... he runs, he forgives, he takes the shame that his son should have taken and of all the twists and turns of God's relationship with us broken sinful people, this is the one that is still so surprising. See... this isn't the story of the prodigal son... it's really the story of the prodigal father. He is extravagantly, recklessly wasteful with his forgiveness and grace. It's like he's just throwing it away.

The father gets to his boy before the town elders do and the kid starts his speech but he can't get it all out... because the father is showing us that relationship with Him isn't about earning it or following the rules. It's about mercy and grace and forgiveness in the face of repentance and confession.

But his father said to the servants, 'Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.' So the party began. Luke 15:22-24 (NLT)

And the father says to his servants... bring my best robe and put it on my son... rings for his fingers... kill the fatted calf and let's invite everyone to a feast because my son is home. He was dead and is alive... he was lost and now is found. And part of the point of this story is as simple as any message I can give. This is maybe first and foremost about coming home. This story says no matter where you find yourself you can always come home. It is never too late to come home. And it's an amazing story but it's not over yet. Because this story isn't just about the younger brother (the one who rebelled by being sooooo bad) and the father, it's also a story about the older brother (the one who would rebel by being sooooo good). We know who the tax collectors, prostitutes and thieves identified with in this story, but what about the Pharisees? Well, Jesus has another character waiting in the wings for them to identify with. Tomorrow, the older brother.

Thursday Reflection: Enter the older son. The one who stayed home and did what he was supposed to. The rule keeper... he becomes the 3rd character in this story that one part of the audience that day could identify with... who knows... maybe you can identify with him as well. Because when people become followers of Jesus one of two things happens... you will either become more like the father in this story or you'll become more like the older brother. And when we become more like the older brother... which is really easy to do because it's just kind of the way human beings often work... we become a real barrier to people who haven't come home yet.

People often think of the church as place filled with older brother types who are cold, smug, arrogant, know it all, self righteous jerks because often churches are filled with older brother types who are cold, smug, arrogant, know it all, self righteous jerks. And if we're not careful the church will become a place where there's very little difference between older brother types and Christians (which there's supposed to be a huge difference). And so Jesus gets to the climax of the story... as these people in the audience sat wondering what was going to happen... a bunch of sinners who identified with the younger brother and this other group that was more like the older brother... what was going to happen with him?

Well, when the older brother got home that evening from working in the fields he could tell there was a party going on. And this would have been a community event. Everyone would have been there. They wouldn't have understood why the father did what the father did but they would have shown up for some of that fatted calf. But the older brother wouldn't go in... he was suspicious. So he asks one of the servants what's going on and when he finds out his brother is home he refuses to go inside. And that leads us to the signs of older brotherism. The

first sign of “older brotherism” is resentment. He resented his brother for leaving... he resented his brother for coming home... he resented his father for taking him back.

The older brother got so angry that he would not even go into the house. Luke 15:28 (CEV)

He refuses to go to the party. He won't eat... he won't laugh... he won't dance. He's the original party pooper. And this is more serious than we'd understand unless we knew first century customs... the oldest son was supposed to be the host of parties. It was a way of a family telling their guests that they were so important to the family that even the oldest son would be their host. But this guy won't do it. The very thing that the older brother had probably resented about his younger brother... that he had humiliated and shamed the family... now the older brother is doing the same thing. Just in a different way. And what we see is that older brotherism doesn't just lead to resentment... it sort of embraces resentment. And I'm not saying resentment isn't a natural response... it's just not one that's going to lead to the kind of life filled with mercy and grace that God wants to desperately for all of His children... even for older brother types. And it humiliates the Father as much as the open rejection of the Father that the younger brother types display in their lives. But there's another sign of older brotherism:

A Tendency Toward Superiority. Older brother types tend to feel superior to everyone else. They feel like they've earned their reward by their rule keeping and toeing the line. That's what happens with the older brother:

So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. Luke 15:28-29 (NIV)

This is fascinating to me... the older brother feels superior to his younger brother but does exactly the same thing in a different way. When he answers his father he doesn't call him father... he doesn't call him anything... he just says, look! This was incredibly disrespectful. Then he says, I never disobeyed a single command. Really? That's interesting because in the first century a son's first and foremost responsibility was to do whatever his father told him... and right now you're disrespecting your father... that breaks one of the top 10 commands. You are refusing to love your brother which was another really big one. What is probably more true is that he's never really obeyed a single command... at least not from his heart which it turns out is what God is all about. But it's not just his lostness that's killing him... it's his blindness. And that's the thing... you ask him how he's doing and he'd say he's doing great. Does that remind you of any of the people that are in the crowd listening to Jesus that day? Maybe the Pharisees? One of their main problems (according to Jesus) is they just didn't know how far from God they were. That's why Jesus said once,

I tell you the truth, corrupt tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the Kingdom of God before you do. Matthew 21:31 (NLT)

Why? Because the tax collectors and prostitutes weren't blind to how far from God they were. The Pharisees couldn't see it... and that leads us to the third sign that you might be an older brother type: **A Tendency Toward Judgmentalism.** The older brother accuses the father of being stingy... and he can't even call his brother his brother...

Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the fattened calf! Luke 15:30 (NLT)

He calls the boy what an outsider, not a member of the family would call him. He is renouncing his community, his relationship with the father and his brother. And then he throws in this interesting little tidbit. The part about prostitutes. Nobody has said anything about prostitutes up to this point so where did that come from? Judgment often leads to gossip and slander. It's what we do if we're not on guard against it. Who knows... maybe it's what he's thinking he'd love to do if he wasn't such a responsible son who never disobeyed a single command. Maybe that's what represents ultimate freedom in his mind... what he'd do if he wasn't tied down by having to do the right thing all the time.

And what we learn in this story is that sometimes there's not nearly as much difference between the rebel and the rule keeper as the rule keeper would like to believe. But what is it that leads to that kind of distance from the father all the while remaining blind to the distance? It's this spirit of chronic resentment, complaining and judgment. It will kill you. And the reason it's so dangerous to this radical movement of Jesus that's called the church is because there is this tendency that younger brothers have to mistake older brotherism with Christianity. And by the way there is also a tendency for older brothers to mistake the two. But the two could not be more different. Because Jesus' way is this radical acceptance and forgiveness where you can't earn the Father's love... you can only accept it and say thank you. Then you do your best to learn to become more like the Father instead of the older brother. So how does the story end? That's the most fascinating part of the story... we'll talk about that tomorrow.

Friday Reflection: So the brother is sitting outside on the front step refusing to come in. Swimming in his resentment & complaining & judgment. But just like he did with the younger son... the father won't give up on the older son. He'll swallow his own pride and go out to talk to the boy, even though that would have been humiliating for a father to do in the first century.

"His father said to him, 'Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours. We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!'" Luke 15:31-32 (NLT)

He says everything I have is yours... and he's telling the truth. The younger son spent all of his share. Everything that's left is the older son's. But the Father will not apologize for spending some of the older boy's inheritance for a celebration when the younger boy came home. He is incredibly kind, yet firm. And notice what he calls the younger son here... not "my son"... but "your brother"... he's inviting the older brother back into the family. But he's also letting the older brother know... I will not refuse any child that wants to come home. If you can't handle that then we've got a problem.

And every single one of Jesus' listeners sit on the edge of their seats at the end of this revolutionary story about one brother who was lost and then came home and another brother who stayed home and yet was just as lost. And they're wondering what the older brother's response will be. What's going to happen next? Some of them are filled with joy at this story... they're thinking that was me... I was the lost sheep, the lost coin... the lost son. Does this mean the Father will welcome me home? Can I really come home? Is it really not too late for even

me??? They were wondering how Jesus would handle the criticism of the Pharisees and He didn't back down one bit... He's still the friend of sinners. But some of Jesus' listeners are so angry they'd like to kill Him. All their hard work following the rules and now He's saying that these scum can be welcomed back without being rejected by the community and shunned for the rest of their lives?

Everybody's dying... what's going to happen... what will the older brother decide to do? And Jesus turns around and walks away. Story over... everyone go home. Why? Why didn't He finish His story? Well it's not because Jesus couldn't think up a good ending to the story. It's because everyone who listens to this story has to decide how to respond for themselves.

This story will end in one of two ways. Either the elder brother turns away from his father, returns to the field, works in coldness and bitterness of heart, and never goes into the house again. Does his work, follows the rules, tows the line, but never goes into the house and grows to hate his brother. That spirit of pride and superiority and anger and complaint gets a little stronger and a little darker in him every year. He grows to hate not only his brother but he secretly grows to hate his father as well. When he dies, he dies all alone. How sad would that be?

Or maybe it ends like this.

Then the elder brother fell to his knees. His hard heart was broken. He said, "Father forgive me. I have sinned against Heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son..." but that's as far as he got. His father helped him up and threw his arms around him and said, "my son was lost and now is found, he was dead and now he's alive! Let the party begin!"

Then he went into the house, and he saw there the skinny, wasted figure of his brother. He remembered how they grew up together and played and fought and worked and loved each other and how he thought his brother had been forever lost to him. But now they would never again be apart. His heart exploded with love, and he was so glad to think that some of his resources could be part of what would be given to his brother that he threw his arms around his brother, and he would not let go. He joined in the celebration, and he laughed louder, and he sang longer, and he danced faster, and he cried harder than anybody else. And the celebration goes on to this day. What an awesome story, right?

But now comes the intensely personal part of Jesus' story. How does the story end for you? Who do you identify with in the story of the prodigal sons and the prodigal father? Why does it matter, you may be asking? I don't have an "older brother" bone in my body. But here is the ironic part of learning to follow this man named Jesus. As we follow Him and start moving forward leaving behind the destructive parts of our life and embracing the healthy future Jesus has in store, one of two things will happen: we'll become more like the Father or more like the older brother. Don't scoff... it happened to me. When I was 20 years old I wanted to come home. The Father welcomed me and picked me up and started me down the right road. But it didn't take very long for me to start looking around at all the people who hadn't gotten their lives back together yet and asking myself, "what's wrong with them? Why can't they just get with the program, like I did. God is awfully lucky to have me, isn't He?"

And then in a blinding moment of clarity God showed me I wasn't becoming more like Him... but more like the Pharisees. That superiority and judgmental attitude would have killed my relationship with the Father. So I never stop asking myself, how does this story end? What does the older brother do?

The Father will welcome anyone home who wants to come home. Younger brother who knows he's lost... or older brother who's been struggling with so much resentment and complaining and judgment that he is as far away from the Father... but didn't even realize it. This story is ultimately about Jesus' listeners. It's about the disciples who were there that day... the sinners... and the Pharisees. But it's also about you and me. How does this story end? That's up to every one of us. And how you respond will determine the outcome of your life.

So What Will Your Response Be?