

Come Home

by F. LaGard Smith

The sermon 'Come Home' explores the universal theme of homecoming and restoration, inviting listeners to recognize their need for spiritual battle and repentance, and to be welcomed and forgiven by the heavenly Father.

Duration: 25:02

Scripture: Matthew 7:7-8, Luke 11:9-10, Luke 15:4-32

Topics: "Love"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker focuses on the parable of the prodigal son from Luke 15:11. He emphasizes the themes of homecoming, spiritual journeys, and pilgrimage. The story centers around a young son who asks his father for his share of the estate and then squanders it in a distant country. After experiencing a severe famine and working as a pig feeder, the son decides to return home and ask for forgiveness. The father, filled with compassion, welcomes him back with open arms and celebrates his return. The speaker also acknowledges that many in the audience may relate to the prodigal son's struggles and battles with addiction or other vices.

Transcript

If you have a Bible with you, please turn over to Luke chapter 15, verse 11. Luke 15, 11. The passage we're going to read together is one we've known for a long time and we're very familiar with.

I'm reading it primarily just to refresh our recollection so we can tie it in with the thoughts, the themes of today about homecoming, about spiritual journeys, about a pilgrimage. Jesus said, there was a man who had two sons. The young one said to his father, Father, give him my share of the estate.

So he divided his property between them. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country, and there squandered his wealth and wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country and he began to be in need.

So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, how many of my father's hired men have food to spare and here I am starving to death.

I will set out and go back to my father and say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired men.

So he got up and went to his father. 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.

The son said to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. 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. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate.

For this son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found. So they began to celebrate.

Meanwhile, the father went to his son. The older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing.

So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. Your brother has come, he replied, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound. The older brother became angry and refused to go in.

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. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him. My son, the father said, you were always with me and everything I have is yours.

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. This story of homecoming, again so very familiar to us, is really about a spiritual journey, a spiritual odyssey.

When we use that phrase spiritual odyssey, odyssey, odyssey, we're hearkening back to an epic poem written by one of the earliest of the Greek poets, Homer, who had sort of twin poems, the Iliad and the Odyssey. The Iliad all about the Trojan War, the one where they had the Trojan horse and so forth. And one of the soldiers in that ten-year-long battle was a man by the name of Odysseus.

So the Odyssey is an epic poem about his returning to Ithaca back in Greece. It's going to take him ten years to get back home, not because it takes that long to get from Troy back to Ithaca, but because he runs into all sorts of problems. There's battles, there's struggles, there's war, there's shipwrecks.

Now remember it's a pagan poem so you won't be surprised perhaps when at a certain point by a magical potion his men are transformed into pigs and back again into humans. But I like that because of the parallel with the prodigal son story and all the pigs. They become pigs and back into humans.

That's a nice little touch. But you know after that Odysseus loses everything. He loses all his men and his ships and shipwrecks and battles.

He finds himself on this little mythical isle with a woman named Calypso who holds him captive for seven of the ten years that he's gone. Seven years being held captive by this woman. Well actually when you think about being held captive it wasn't exactly that way.

This is not a high moral Christian tale. He was captivated by her and she was wanting to take him away from his faithful wife Penelope who's waiting faithfully back in Ithaca hoping for her husband to come back after the war. But Calypso's trying to steal him away from her and she promises him all sorts of things.

You'll like this, eternal youth, eternal life. That's pretty seductive. So here he is with this woman captivated by her and not particularly being the person he ought to be on his way back to his wife.

But you know something deep within him resonates and Homer says to us at the end of that seven years that he has an inly feeling, an inward longing for his native shore, for his native shore, home. He wants to go home. So he tells Calypso that he really wants to go home and she gives up.

She says okay if I can't win you by a promise of eternal youth and eternal life just go on. But he's going to have to go literally through hell to get back to Ithaca because he has to go through Hades. He goes down into Hades and talks to all these spirits of the dead.

He reemerges and finds himself on the outskirts of Ithaca and here's where it gets really sweet compared with the prodigal son parable. He disguises himself as a poor beggar and for a time stays with a sheep farmer among the pigs. Now he's not in poverty and he's not at the moment in a dissolute state but there is that wonderful pig story, pig story and how all of that comes together.

Then he finally reveals himself to Penelope. She's been waiting faithfully. A hundred and nine suitors have been trying to get her hand while he's been gone and they just swear they're going to kill him if he ever comes back because they're determined to marry this godly woman.

So he introduces himself back to his wife and in a nice interesting little twist he also is welcomed home by his righteous son, sort of the dissolute father being welcomed home by the righteous son. This is the archetypical kind of story of homecoming. It's written 700 years before Christ and what's nice about that is that 700 years before Christ is when the nation of Israel was being taken captive by the Assyrians, 723 B.C. Same kind of period which only reminds us of Israel's story.

Israel had a spiritual odyssey from the period of the judges where they went through cycles of sin and restoration to the times when they had the battles with their foreign oppressors and they're taken captive, they're taken away into exile. They experience a lot of death that you see in Lamentation and then they're restored. The story of homecoming and pilgrimage always centers around battles, struggles, warfare, captivity, exile and finally restoration coming home, coming home.

So whether it be in the story that Jesus told so familiar to us or in a pagan epic that resonates with virtually everyone or whether it be in the history of God's people, it's always the same story of battle, captivity, exile and restoration which brings us to that prodigal son. Let's talk about that prodigal son for just a moment. I don't know who you are but I suspect very strongly that in an audience of this size there will be some of you who identify with the prodigal son in a very particular close way.

You know what it's like to do spiritual battle. You know what it's like to do spiritual battle. You know what it's like to be a long way from your heavenly father.

You know what it's like to be captive, held by chains of alcohol or drugs or pornography or sex or gambling. Some of you do daily battles with one of those things and you just can't seem to break away from those chains. And I suspect that some of you have tried to go home.

You've gone maybe a quarter of the way and back to the pigs. Maybe you've gotten halfway home and back to the pigs. Some of you, interestingly enough, have gone all the way home, all the way home.

And it looks good and things are going well and before you know it, you're walking out the front or back door back to the pigs, back to the mud, back to the muck, back to the mire, back to your old habits. I would like to say that I just don't understand that process at all, getting all the way home and then leaving again. I would like to say I don't understand that.

Actually, I think I do understand it more than I would like to understand it because not all of our sins are addictive, but many of our sins are repetitive and we go back to the same sins over and over. But if you're one of those, I suspect fairly few, but if you're one of those in the audience today, you need to come home today to stay. And it's no use saying, but LaGarde, I can't help myself.

I can't help myself. I just really cannot help myself. I just keep doing it.

And the reason I know you can't say that is because you have helped yourself before. You've gotten a quarter of the way, you've gotten a half way, sometimes you've gotten all the way home. You can help yourself.

You're not a lost cause. And you're sitting here among us today for being someone who lives among the pigs. You wash up pretty well because you've got your family and your friends and your co-workers completely fooled.

They would never know that you're one of the people we're talking about right now. And if you can fool people, if you've got enough wits about you to do that, this battle is not lost. And if God were praying to himself, he would be praying for you.

As it is, he is willing you home and loving you unconditionally home. But you know, for my money, the more interesting brother is the older brother. The older brother.

You're pretty familiar, I think most of us in here are pretty familiar with the older brother. The older brother grew up in a Christian home. He was read Bible stories like the prodigal son story at a very early age.

He learned This Little Light of Mine, went to vacation Bible school, Sunday school, year after year. At a fairly early age, he was baptized. In his school life, he probably went to a Christian school somewhere along the way.

Got out and graduated college, got a good job, married a Christian. They had some kids and raised them real well. This person that you know, this older brother, he always comes to church on Sundays.

He always takes the Lord's Supper with us. He reads his Bible fairly often. He prays regularly.

Generous to a fault, he'll write a check out at no hesitation whatsoever. And if there's a flood or a tornado, he's going to be one of the first people to go help out and do service in the name of the Lord. He's just one of those good people that we all know who always does the right thing.

The older son had always done the right thing. Did I mention he had always done the right thing? He'd always done the right thing until it came for the moment when he needed to do the right thing the most. When his wayward brother came home and they needed to rejoice over the one who was dead and now alive, lost and now found.

And you know what? He did not do the right thing. Instead, oozing out of him is this bitterness, this selfish rage, this condemnation, this self-righteousness. Did you get that in the reading again? I mean it's just awful.

The guy who always did the right thing and reminded his father that he'd always done the right thing and now he does not do the right thing. Why? Why is that? You know what I think happened is that by his own admission, he'd never left home. He'd never gone away from his father to feel the distance between himself and his father.

He'd never had a spiritual odyssey where he's battling spiritual battles right and left. Do you know one of the ironies, I think, is that the younger brother had a kind of spiritual advantage over his older brother. He had an advantage because like David who said, my sins are always before me.

The person in that situation, moment to moment, hour by hour, day by day, week in, week out, year in, year out, they know exactly what their sin is. They don't have to be reminded of their sin and they struggle with it. There's a certain advantage there because if you go back to the older brother, he doesn't even know that he's being held captive.

He too is being held captive by a seductive world and its values. The materialism of the world that he and we encounter, the distractions of the world that he and we encounter. He just didn't even know he was being held captive.

More to be pitied is the one who doesn't know he's being held captive than the one who does because if you don't think you need to repent, you're not going to repent. He's like this publican, I thank God that I'm not like my wayward brother. He just doesn't even know.

He says, I'm not battling any spiritual battles, not really. Oh, I know I sin. I know all of sin and fall ashore to the glory of God.

I know I have my faults. I know I'm not perfect, but I don't have any major spiritual battles that are confronting me. You know the problem with that is if there is not an ongoing battle that you recognize, the war is probably over and you probably didn't win.

You probably lost the battle with the world. You know, his brother had bad, bad, bad, bad habits, but in the end, he had a heart for God. The older brother had godly habits, godly habits, but he did not have a heart for God.

He didn't have a longing for God. He didn't have an inward yearning for his native shore. There's no tug to bring him back.

He didn't feel distanced enough for that kind of tug. You know, none is so distanced from God as those who are convinced that there is no distance from God. How many prodigal sons are in this story? The one that we always talk about, the story of the prodigal son, we ought to change that.

It ought to be the story of the prodigal sons because both of them are prodigals. Both of them have strayed from their father. One knows he has, the other doesn't know that he has.

There are two prodigal sons, and we are all prodigal sons. Did you feel more comfortable a while ago when I was talking about those who were addicted to some kind of identifiable sin? Did that kind of give

you a period of ease there? Now, where are you? Do you think that you might be one of the ones who is like the older son, distanced from God, and we don't even know it? More prodigal because we're not prodigal in our minds? We need to come home. We need to come home to God.

To our father. We need to come home to our father. But a quick word about that.

I had a wonderful father on earth. Really, just a great father. Miss him a lot.

And so when I read this story, I can see my father, visualize my father. That's the way he would have been. And I should have probably come home and said, Dad, I've sinned against heaven and I've sinned against you.

I want to come home. There are times in my life when I should have done that. But had I done it, I know exactly how my father would have responded.

I am keenly aware that some of you in this audience today would not have the same image at all. You do not have or did not have a father who loved you unconditionally, who would have met you at the door with his arms open wide. I'm keenly aware your image is quite different.

And some of you, some of you, sadly, some of you would have suffered some kind of abuse, maybe terrible abuse at the hands of your father. So this story would not be as comforting to you as it is to maybe some of the rest of us. The most beautiful thing about it is that if that's your father, you have a heavenly father who could not be more different, who does love you unconditionally, who would welcome you home, who is willing you home.

That father, the father that is depicted in the next song that we want to sing that is one of the most sublime of all the hymns in our hymn book. This hymn, pull out your hymn book, if you will, and turn over to 420. 420.

Samuel Longfellow wrote this hymn in 1864, and there's a good reason why it's been around a long time and why so many people love it. It captures not just the story that Jesus told, but the heart that I hope we all have after thinking carefully about being prodigals ourselves. Love for all, and can it be? Can I hope it is for me? I, who strayed so long ago, strayed so far and fell so low.

I, the disobedient child, wayward, passionate, and wild. I, who left my father's home in forbidden ways to roam. I, who spurned his loving hold.

I, who would not be controlled. I, who would not hear his call. I, the willful prodigal.

To my father can I go? At his feet myself I'll throw. In his house there yet may be place, a servant's place for me. See, my father waiting stands.

See, he reaches out his hands. God is love. I know, I see, love for me.

Yes, even me.

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