

# How Far Is The Far Country

by Fred Tomlinson

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*This sermon delves into the parable of the Prodigal Son from Luke's Gospel, emphasizing the themes of repentance, grace, and the father's unconditional love. It explores the concept of the 'far country' as a spiritual state outside of God's presence, highlighting the need for a transformative new birth experience. The message focuses on the extravagant grace of God, showcasing how true repentance is initiated by God's sovereign work in a person's heart, leading to a profound realization of one's sinfulness and God's overwhelming love and acceptance.*

**Duration:** 50:22

**Scripture:** Luke 15:1, Ephesians 1:4, James 1:14, Romans 4:4, Matthew 11:28, Hebrews 4:9, John 6:44

**Topics:** "Repentance", "Unconditional Love"

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## Description

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## Transcript

Well, if you have your Bible with you, please open it up to Luke's Gospel with me. I'll give you the reference in just a moment, but I wanted to say something first of all. Like everyone else, I have childhood memories or memories of my days when I was young.

One of them comes back to mind as I turn you to the passage that we're going to look at in a moment. And that is, I can picture myself arriving at the Gospel Hall, I would not have been into my teens yet, but arriving at the Gospel Hall midweek for the children's meeting, which happened every week, and coming into the hall from the back, through the doors at the back of the room, and very quickly recognising that something special was going to happen that evening. And that was because in the aisleway between the two sets of pews, there was a little table, and on it was a filmstrip projector, and at the front was a screen, and this happened from time to time.

This was before there was such a word in my vocabulary as movies, and of course there was no television, there was no, and I could go down a whole list of things that didn't exist back then, but so far as

this little projector, I think it was called an Aldis, I think that was the name, you'll have to check up on me, and just a little piece of equipment with a big long lens on the front of it, and so this wasn't a slide projector, it was a filmstrip projector, so there was a strip of 35mm film, which might have been two feet long or thereabouts, in a row. And so when everything would start up, and the lights went out, and the projector light went on, we'd see a coloured picture on the screen, and then while we were all looking at this, in this exciting moment, looking at a coloured picture on the screen, the leader of the event would be reading through the scriptures relative to the picture that we were looking at, because they had someone had presented, portrayed, and painted, or whatever, these different pictures, which were all portraying sections of the story which was being read to us, and then we'd move on to the next picture. So as you can see, it was tremendously exciting for us, and I can remember one of the favourite stories that we got to look at in that particular way, was the story of the Prodigal Son, and I'd like to read part of that story to you.

The parable which we refer to as the parable of the Prodigal Son, rightly or wrongly, is the longest of all the parables that Jesus told. I was also taught in those days that a parable was an earthly story with a heavenly meaning, and of course Jesus spoke in parables frequently. This particular parable actually comes in two parts.

Both parts are essential to the overall message that Jesus was seeking to communicate, however, for this morning, we're not going to look at both parts this morning. So let me just read first of all. In chapter 15 of Luke's Gospel, I want to read two verses from the top of the chapter, and then we'll go to the section that I've been referring to.

So from verse 1 we read, Then drew near unto him, unto Jesus, all the publicans and sinners for to hear him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners and eateth with them. And he spoke this parable unto them, saying, Verse 11 A certain man had two sons, and the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me.

And he divided unto them his living. And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living. And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land, and he began to be in want.

And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat, and no man gave unto him. And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger.

I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. Make me as one of thy hired servants. And he arose and came to his father.

But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet, and bring hither the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and be merry.

For this my son was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found. And they began to be merry.

Amen. The story, as you can see very readily, and let me say this before I go ahead with what I was about to say. Let me remind you of something that we know very well, but let me remind you, let it be highlighted in your mind and kept as a kind of a backdrop as we continue to look here.

And that is that this is Jesus speaking. We've just been listening to Jesus. And we've just been listening to a story that Jesus told, an earthly story, but it had a heavenly meaning.

In other words, Jesus wasn't just talking for the sake of telling stories. He, the son of God incarnate, had a message to communicate with men and women. And he himself had designed a story which he tells here.

We've read part of it. And so every word is chosen by God. I know we're reading English and he didn't say it in English, but nevertheless, every word, every phrase, every point that he's making was designed by Jesus Christ to communicate something to the people he was hearing.

He wasn't just being wordy, but every particular part of it is designed particularly for a spiritual purpose and reason. So we'll keep that in our mind, shall we, as we look at anything that we are able to find here. So the story involves two sons and a father.

This is, of course, very obvious to us. The two sons, both of them, the two sons stand in complete contrast to their father. Both sons are lost.

The father is the epitome of grace. This section of the parable is very commonly used, and certainly was in my background, as a tool of evangelism. And there's nothing wrong with that.

I'm not challenging that by any means. That said, clearly that was not the original intent when Jesus was speaking this parable. There was a purpose that really is obvious.

I hope that we can discover that from just reminding ourselves what the opening two verses were in the chapter. He's responding to a prevailing situation that had to do with the Pharisees and the scribes, in other words, the religious hierarchy and their hearts toward other people who were not as knowledgeable in spiritual things as the Pharisees thought themselves to be, or as lofty in status as the Pharisees thought themselves to be. And Jesus had then this purpose, which he's explaining by all three of the parables which appear in this chapter.

The one we're looking at is the third in the category, as we know. So this section of Scripture, while it may suit us very nicely as a basis for a gospel talk for evangelism purposes, and again, nothing wrong with that, but the fact is that I think it has an application which is very appropriate to any church gathering or gathering of people who are professing to be Christians. And it could very well be that this story has an application for you in particular, whoever you are.

What I want to do this morning in the time that I have is build the message which I feel that God has put on my heart around four two-word phrases that I find here. I could have extended it beyond four, but it's four that we shall look at. We'll find the first one in verse 12, where we read, And the younger of them said to his father, Give me.

Give me. That's a phrase, really, whether it comes in exactly that form or not is not the point, but the idea behind those words is a very familiar concept in the culture in which we find ourselves living at this point in time. In thinking about it, it reminds me of how things all started so far as the unfolding message of the Bible is concerned.

It reminds me of Adam and Eve in that paradise into which God placed them and so on. It was there, we remember, that Adam, this incredibly privileged individual that God uniquely created, virtually made an idol of himself and bowed down before it and in doing so, of course, rejected the authority of the word of God himself. What we also know is that that spirit, that self-centered spirit replicated itself in his offspring for all time and here we are.

All is for self, for self-gratification. Even when many people perform acts of kindness that appear to be for the benefit of other people, in so many cases, concealed within that act is a selfish motive. And this self-spirit not only wants for itself, but it wants what it's looking at or thinking about now and that's what we're finding here in this section of scripture.

And without the restraint of human decency and a fear of the law we end up with what we're finding around the nation at this point in time that is vandalism and looting and rape and cheating. It's give me, I deserve this, it's for me, for self-gratification and so on. That's the very spirit of the age and the culture in which we find ourselves.

It reminds me of a proverb or a word in Proverbs chapter 30 where I read, the leech has two daughters crying give, give. Another translation puts it, the leech has two suckers that cry out more, more. That's the living translation and so on.

So we come back to this younger of the two sons in this story that Jesus was describing here and he makes a request which clearly is a scandalous request of his father. And in a sense the essence of what he is desiring was legitimate but not yet. It was quite in order for him to expect and anticipate that he would benefit from the value of the resources or the property that belonged at the moment to his father.

But he couldn't wait for that event and what he said was tantamount to saying we expected you to die sooner than this because we want this, I want this material for myself. And this is what Jesus himself is describing. perhaps we need to be very careful that we don't impose that same idea in our relationship with God ourselves really.

The father in that situation was the source of the supply that he wanted to get and so he comes. In so many cases perhaps that's a concealed motive in our praying where so much of our praying is give me give me, fill me bless me, heal me even in our worship it can come across. I could quote a number of songs which are common today but I'm thinking of one which says here I come to worship here I come to bow down so that's the way the song goes and there's nothing fundamentally wrong with it but it manifests this same spirit worship is to worship God for who he is and to bow down before him because of who he is whereas here we're saying that somehow in it we're concerned this morning like here I come I mean there's an audacity in it really if I'm looking at it from that particular point of view which is clearly wrong somehow and we even in our worship again in so many cases it's this self factor we come with our gifts and we come with our talents what we can do and the emphasis is on what we are doing and we're missing something I love the lines in this great hymn which was written what 244 years ago nothing in my hand I bring simply to thy cross I cling do you notice the difference naked come to thee for dress helpless look to thee for grace foul I to the fountain fly wash me saviour or I die lovely there's no question that God is gracious to us and he does impart to us blessings in so many different forms and we praise his name for that but how careful we need to be able to understand something of can I refer to it as the priority in God's heart that which is God is looking for God's intention wasn't merely just to bless men and women and provide this that and the other for them so that they can have a happy life it's not that God's against that

but he looks on a different level altogether it's all about him it's all about his name you know in Ezekiel chapter 36 which we've looked at many times in the past which has such a lot to say about God's great covenant of blessing for his people but we find right there in that statement and that series of verses God saying I do not do this for your sake O house of Israel but for my holy name's sake and somewhere we need to get that as the foundation upon which we stand and upon which we function and certainly upon which we worship God for my holy name's sake in reading here in this section of scripture the boy comes to his father do you see this in verse 12 he says give me give me the portion of goods that falleth to me and once more I'm going to say remember Jesus is teaching this and notice how the very next sentences and he divided unto them his living when I referred to the father as being the epitome of grace this is where I get that idea this story is being fashioned by Jesus to speak of something infinitely higher clearly when he speaks about this father this earthly father in his earthly story he has in mind the heavenly father and his amazing grace toward the and in response to the audacity of sinful men and women like you and me the father in this story he soars above that which was rational and that which was reasonable and we see his grace and the father responds you know we have to remember so many things to remember aren't there but we have to remember that God's grace we sometimes find ourselves referring to his grace and we divide it into categories which is not wrong we talk about his common grace he causes the rain to fall on the righteous and on the unrighteous that's an expression of his common grace and there are times when we come in our audacity and make audacious claims and requests and there are times when he seems to have responded to those claims but we must be careful that we don't confuse his common grace in extending his kindness to us that he is approving of what we are requesting and that would certainly be true in this story would it not there is no way in the world that the father wanted to do this that the son was requesting and yes the very next statement as I pointed out says and he divided unto them his living Amen it's so easy to catch on lock our minds onto this idea that well God provided or God did this so it must be right well not necessarily so and I think that's quite quite an under not an understood fact in verse 13 I find that second phrase let me read it again not many days hence after the younger son gathered all together and took his journey into a far country into a far country clearly there was intended a spiritual significance to that statement I have to give titles to these messages in some of the situations other people do it for you but I want to entitle this message how far is the far country and my answer to that question in the statement is everywhere outside of the father's house that's where it is it's everywhere outside of his house after the fall that I alluded to earlier that territory which was the paradise of God the garden of God as it's referred to on another occasion became the birthplace if you will of mankind and all those that would be born that would come out from the succeeding generations would be citizens of that territory which could very well be referred to as the far country it was transformed into something that God never intended it to be as the result of man's actions which were intensely selfish as we've seen and God's judgment which resulted from it at that time but the fact is that all men and women being born into this world are citizens of the far country they're on the outside of the father's house and the only possible way for man's citizenship to be altered and changed is by the regenerating miracle of the new birth that's the only way there is no other way offered to us at all and in saying that I think we need to remind ourselves here that the new birth it's not just a phrase that's become so common for us in evangelical circles of course because it's on a biblical basis true new birth sorry to have to even say that but true new birth is more than just a mental adjustment to whatever one's self, certain facts in the bible or toward God however we want to think about that but a true new birth, it's a miracle of God it regenerates us and it transforms us and it actually moves us as it were according to the apostle Paul in Colossians from the kingdom of darkness where we were citizens into the kingdom of God's dear son where we become citizens of heaven our citizenship is transformed and changed unalterably and it places us this miracle places us in the father's

house that's a wonderful thing to think about and listen the only unalterable evidence that a man or a woman has been truly born again is that they no longer live in the far country and they are infused with the new and holy life of God by his spirit you believe that? it is that radical this is why Jesus came, this is what the gospel is all about I'm convinced in my own mind that there's a huge quantity of men and women who profess to be Christians but they've never really left the far country and if that's true well then that is serious because that would presuppose that they've never really experienced this life transforming new birth that Jesus came to make possible for men and women so the far country then is far nearer than we realised you know the far country could be as close as your computer it could be as close as your TV set it could be as close as your bedroom it could be as close as your next thought there's a paradox here the far country is not so much a place but it's a state a spiritual state the far country is always a place into which those who have made a profession of faith in Christ they retreat to it's always a private place it's what happens in their heads and in their hearts and where they go, you can move into the far country in those private moments of your thoughts and of your heart Jesus is dealing with the hearts of the people when he speaks to the Pharisees and Scribes as we noticed earlier, Amen for a Christian abiding in the Father's house is really another way of thinking of abiding in Him it was James who said James chapter 1 verse 14 and 15 reads like this, but each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire then desire when it is conceived gives birth to sin and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death there is, I believe, a place of immunity, a place of safety sheltered in Him where we experience the blessings, the full blessings or at least we enter into the full blessings of Christ at that point, but the far country always has an appeal to it and no doubt we meet many of the citizens of the far country in our day to day activities or whether we watch them in some technical way or whatever, but there is always an allure, there is always that which is appealing to us but in making that response that James is referring to in that passage there is always a cost involved and the joys which are being promised by the far country are always short lived there is always a hook in the devil's bait and the intent is always to drag men and women further away from God's purpose for their lives and seducing them from purity and passion to God and purpose for their very living, so sin never fulfills its promises never satisfies, it leaves only emptiness and bankruptcy, and this man found that out as he engaged himself in what is described in one translation as a reckless lifestyle of immorality and eventually he had spent all there's another one of those two words, it's not the one I'm thinking about particularly, but this road, if I'm back thinking about this as a journey out from the security and the blessing of the father's house, is actually more like a toll road and you pay the toll at the end of the journey and you find at that point that the price that you pay for the journey is far higher than you ever expected it would be, because you were so taken up with your own self and the gratification of your own desires, and there seemed to be no downside to it at the time, but there certainly will be.

In verse 17 we read, and when he came to himself to himself how did he arrive there? Did he wake up one morning and say, that's it, I'm finished here maybe, maybe yes but what we know is that any reformation that we seek to make in our own lives is always short-lived, we know that very well. The Bible in other verses makes statements such as these can a man change his heart? Or another says, can a leopard change his spots? And yet another says, can the Ethiopian change his skin? So we end up really just chasing shadows in the name of changing our lives or improving ourselves spiritually or trying to become something somewhat better, more approved of God, but we're chasing shadows, we're chasing those bubbles that children make they all burst at some point The question is, how did the man come to himself? Jesus let's throw some light on this for us in another scripture, he says this you did not choose me I chose you let me read some verses of scripture to you if you read them thoughtfully they may be very challenging, they may be very scary to our theology but you know, I thank God for someone who I used to listen to years ago when he was around, who said I didn't write the Bible and that's something to

remember isn't it, we didn't write these things we want to know what the Bible says, we want to know what God is saying I'm reading to you, you needn't turn, that's just two verses but it's from Ephesians chapter 1 I'll read three verses actually to himself according to the good purpose of his will and to the praise of his glory of his grace wherein he has made us accepted in the beloved Jesus said, the choosing has been done by me and that's a clear statement here this man didn't in the light of these kinds of scriptures I've just quoted to you and there are very many more the man, and Jesus would know that the man didn't just come to himself he certainly looked at the pigs and he knew what he felt about himself and his hunger and so on, no question about that but no one truly comes to God merely because they're bankrupt at one level or another the Bible clearly teaches that men and women come to God because God has taken an initiative and he is working upon that life and he opens the eyes of their understanding and he makes his truth known to them concerning himself and ministers faith to them to believe what it is that God is saying it always has to be God who takes the initiative it can never be man but the sovereign God makes his own choices and he awakens men and women spiritually and he does that in all kinds of different ways he may use many different means in order to do that he may use people, he may use circumstances but let us be careful that we're placing the emphasis where it belongs, and we're not coming because things got so bad in our lives men may choose to try and make amends in one way or another on that basis, but in terms of coming to God we are awakened by God's initiative by God's spirit sovereignly to us, and it's him God, who brings men and women to this point and he reveals himself to us and at that point, when God reveals his truth to us, light is shone into our human hearts, and I'm thinking just now of Saul of old not the Saul who became Paul, but King Saul where the divine light revealed truth to him, and his response was I have played the fool and it wasn't just that he'd come into a difficult circumstance but truth shone like a searchlight into his heart and he saw what he couldn't see by any other means and this is exactly what God does and prior to coming to that place for any one of us we would have to say with the hymn writer our richest gain we count but loss and poor contempt on all our pride and once God awakens us in that particular way to see things as they truly are we know, as it were deep within our hearts, almost intuitively we know where to run at that moment and it's to our father's house and the boy says, I will arise and go he plans his speech his speech was not repentance his speech was common sense under the circumstances, but the next scene is stunning, and you can see this in verse 20 and he arose and came to his father but when he was a great way off his father saw him and had compassion and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him this is the father, when he saw him who did the father see? he believed he saw the young boy that had grown up in his household and yes, he saw the young boy as the result of his behaviour at the end, he was worthy of the harshest discipline that could be possibly meted out, it was audacious what he had said to his father and father would know very, very well all of the criticism that he, the father, bore as the result of what was deemed to be his foolish response in going along with the boy's request and the neighbours who would look at him from that time and say, what a foolish old man to have behaved in that way, it was that boy that was at the centre of all of that that really wounded the father's heart in so many ways that it caused such pain to his heart the boy who had come and said, dad I want this now, you know, I can't wait until you die and then the father having given it to him he'd taken it away into that far country and he'd squandered it and now it was all gone there was nothing left and when the father saw him, when he was still a great way off even the very statement leads me to believe that this was not just a chance thing it leads me to believe that maybe for days for months, for years, I don't know that the father would look along the road as he went about his business on his property and wondered, would he ever see that boy returning and when he saw him when he was a great way off and he recognised him, he saw his gait as he's walking he saw his rags, he saw the filth of the boy and he ran and old men didn't run then they shouldn't run now but they didn't then, but this old man clearly he gathered up the skirts of

his clothing pulled it under the belt that was around his waist and he ran and I believe it was at this moment the true repentance took place in the boy prior to that he was remorseful but remorse is not repentance before that he had regret, but regret is not repentance Romans chapter 4 says it's the goodness of God that leads to repentance and when he saw his father who he knew he had injured and wounded so deeply his father had shown such amazing grace to him he's now running toward him I believe something was going on inside the depths of this young man's heart at this point and you know what happens it doesn't come prefixed with this word but it's as though he says dad and he starts to speak to him and I've sinned against heaven you see it in verse 21 I'm no more worthy to be called your son and it's as though the father ignores what he's saying completely and the father is now embracing him in all of the stench of the pigs place where he'd been living and he's embracing him and it wasn't a casual traditional fellowship hug this man is holding his son he would later say this boy was dead and he's alive again he was lost and he's found and he's holding him at this point Jesus is telling this story he has a purpose in telling it and the boy tries to speak but now the father is kissing him and he doesn't just peck his cheek but the word in the Greek is that he kissed him and he kissed him and he kissed him it's to kiss profusely he couldn't stop kissing him amazing grace amen and the boy's heart broke at that point there lies the great need it's not just merely the communicating of information about the gospel but men and women need to be impacted sovereignly by the spirit of God that brings a man and a woman to a place where they see themselves and their behaviour their own behaviour, their wicked disobedience for what it really is in the light of such grace and such love and such kindness this boy had no right to anything he had forfeited this by what he had received and he'd squandered and here we are so what we're looking at here is the extravagance of grace and it's Jesus telling the story and the father doesn't say anything about you've wasted your life, he's no reprimand just a loving, whole hearted in the most ultimate sense embrace and acceptance oh the welcome I have found there, do you remember it? God in all his love made known we sing amen and all the benefits of sonship which we could spend more time on but the father bestowed these blessings upon his son as he is restored to a full status of sonship in the family, never mind the servant thing the boy had been talking about but the robe is the special robe that's kept for the guest of honour who may come to their property, put that on him he says, and the ring which was a symbol of his authority as a true son in the family put the ring on his finger, put shoes on his feet slaves don't wear shoes in these days put shoes on his feet, each of these items declare his father's acceptance and embrace of him and then the lavish celebration and the meal that was made, the boy is home, safe amazing grace, amen you know what the simplest definition of grace is it is love that pays a price and that's exactly what happened in this story you know, I don't know everyone and I will never know everyone that's going to be listening to me this morning but I'd like to ask you, are you home, safe this morning have you entered into that rest that remains for the people of God will you cease from your own works your own efforts to try and be the kind of Christian you feel or understand you should be ceased from your own works as God did from his but you know, that rest that many people seek for, will never be found in the far country it doesn't exist there nor can it it exists exclusively in the father's house or as I pointed you earlier, in Christ that's where it belongs, only there I wonder if the Holy Spirit is perhaps whispering into your heart this morning the gracious words that Jesus once spoke when he said come unto me all ye who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest rest for your souls we used to sing a hymn back in those long ago days that I referred to earlier and for a good longer time after that come home ye that are weary come home and I believe that's the word of God to many of you who are listening to me this morning it's a call it's the call of God into your heart do you hear his whisper deep in your heart calling you to come home come home completely, come home permanently just come home I pray to God that you will make the appropriate response to him in your heart Amen Can I just add this footnote if you have been blessed and

helped through this message can I encourage you let me know, I'd love to hear from you you can find me through our fellowship website which is [mckenziefellowship.com](http://mckenziefellowship.com) God bless you Amen

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