

Still a Great Way Off (Gospel)

by Roy Hession

The sermon emphasizes the importance of seeking God's conditions of peace and forgiveness, and highlights the generosity and love of God in restoring us to a right relationship with Him.

Duration: 44:22

Scripture: Exodus 34:6, Psalm 103:8, Isaiah 55:7, Matthew 6:33, Luke 14:31, Luke 15:20, Romans 5:8

Topics: "Gospel"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher focuses on two snippets from the parables in Luke chapters 14 and 15. The first snippet is about counting the costs before deciding to become a Christian. The preacher uses the analogy of two kings preparing for war, with one king wisely considering his chances of victory before engaging in battle. The second snippet is about the prodigal son, who is welcomed back by his father with open arms and restored to a proper relationship. The preacher emphasizes the compassion and love of the father, highlighting the importance of forgiveness and restoration in our relationship with God.

Transcript

Please, I want you to stand and sing two verses of 436. Jesus, my Lord, to Thee I cry, unless Thou help me, I must die. Play it through, for sake of those who may not have heard this.

Jesus, my Lord, to Thee I cry, Jesus, my Lord, to Thee I cry. Please be seated. And now, dear Lord, we pray Thee that in these closing minutes Thou will give us a spirit of understanding, of revelation.

We ask, Lord, that the penny may drop for some of us this evening. And we shall find Thee strangely near, and we shall find ourselves exactly mirrored in Thy holy word. And above all, Lord, may we see Thy love mirrored for us too.

Lord, we are looking to Thee, for that without which we shall listen to no prophet, that spirit of revelation. Grant it to us, even as we sit. May we not struggle to try and understand, and we say, now, Lord, it's over to You to show these things to me.

Grant this, we pray Thee in Thy name. Amen. Well, it's been a lovely evening.

We've really heard some songs of all sorts, different style, but all about Jesus and His great redemption. I want to turn you to Luke, chapter 14 and 15. Chapters 14 and 15 of Luke are what you may call the parable alley of the New Testament.

In those two chapters there are no less than seven parables. And this evening, for a moment or two, I want to take two snippets out of those parables. And I want to put these two snippets from different parables in contrast, the one to the other.

The first is in Luke 14, verse 31. What king, going to make war against another king, sitteth not down first, and consulteth whether he be able with ten thousand to meet him that cometh against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is still a great way off, he sendeth a delegation and desireth conditions of peace. There is the one verse, and the snippet is, Or else, while the other is still a great way off, he sendeth a delegation and desireth conditions of peace.

And then the other parable from which I take a snippet is chapter 15, the famous parable of the prodigal son. And I read to you verse 20, where at last he's been brought to decision. He's bitten the dust.

He's at an end of himself. And there's only one way for him to go, and that's back. He can't go forward, but he can go back.

And there's a way back to his father still available to him. And he decides that's the way he's going to go. And verse 20, he arose and came to his father.

But when he was yet a great way off, still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. And the snippet from there is when he was still a great way off. You might think that there's nothing very much to link those two parables together, but there is one phrase that they have common.

In the first, that king who has a weaker army is doing the wise thing, that while the other with his 20,000 is still a great way off, he sends a delegation requesting conditions of peace, when he was still a great way off. And you get the same phrase in the other parable. That father, when he saw his son returning, when he was still a great way off, ran to meet him, fell on his neck and kissed him.

And that wonderful restoration to his father took place, while he was still a great way off. First of all, a word or two about that first one. The subject of that particular parable is that the need we have of counting the cost, when we decide we're going to become Christians.

And the Lord there uses the illustration of warfare. And we see two kings involved in conflict and about to declare war. And one does a very wise thing.

He sits down first and counts the cost, whether with 20,000 he can have any hope at all against this other king who's coming against him with 40,000. He obviously wouldn't go into battle without making some calculations like that, would he? And when he finds that he's hopelessly outnumbered, two to one, he does something about it. And he does this something while the other king is still a great way off.

He doesn't say, because he's a great way off, there's cause for me to know nothing. But rather, while he's yet a great way off, before the conflict begins, I've got an opportunity to do something. And what he does is to send a delegation of his chief men on a very humbling mission.

And they ask that great king with his great army for conditions of peace. And he makes that decision wisely, while that other king is still a great way off. Now, man is living his life in independence of God.

All we, like sheep we read, have gone astray and listened, we have turned, quite deliberately, at one time or another, everyone to his own way. We have put ourselves in rebellion against the lordship of God over our lives. We've decided we're going to run our own lives, please, and we're going to go our own way.

And that's been a decision. You might not have made all that consciously, but it's a whole attitude, a young person will say, or older person. You are living your life in independence and in rebellion against God.

It doesn't say we've turned everyone to his wicked way or his immoral way, but simply to his own way. The central letter of the little word sin is I, me, running my own life and going my own way. And that is sin.

Now, God is very long-suffering to sinners. He never would have sent Jesus into the world for us, had he not loved sinners. No one can tell how long-suffering and patient is God with us rebellious sinners.

But if we persist in our own way, refusing to bow to his lordship over us, ultimately he's got to take action against us. He takes action against us, and maybe it's yet to come to you in this life. I cannot prophesy good concerning the person who's going to run their own life and go their own way.

Things are going to go wrong, things are going to end in a mess, and you're going to have sorrow and distress. God ultimately has to take action against you, and not only in life, but in that last dreadful catastrophe, for such it is for those that are away from God, death. It's appointed unto men once to die.

You've got an appointment, and you cannot fail to keep it. And after death, there's judgment. When the small and great stand before God, and where each has to give an account of himself.

Now, in view of this inevitable confrontation with God, don't you think some of us ought to sit down and count the cost? Can you, with your puny little resources, hope to win against God? Do you really think you're going to go through life, going your own way, running your own life, refusing the overtures of divine love, and get away with it? Is that likely? Is the laugh always going to be on the side who's lived his life away from God and come out smiling? It's not going to be. In view of the fact that your calculations must lead to the fact that you're not going to win. In view of the fact when you count the cost of not becoming a Christian, don't you think you ought to do something about it? Don't you think that now is the time to make your peace with that God who cannot but confront you in some of the ways I've suggested? Now, when we speak to one another and various ones about the need to get right with God and make their peace with God, the usual answer is that final confrontation is a great way off.

Young people particularly feel that. There's no great urgency in their case. They won't run out of life for a long time yet.

And any big, dramatic confrontation with God in life or in death, that's way in that distant future, and for that reason they feel they can defer the whole matter because He is a great way off. And it's amazing too that older people still feel that any real encounter and confrontation with God in the ways I've suggested, even for them, it's still a great way off. And you know, it's always so.

Everybody says it. It's built into your thoughts. The hour of crisis is yet a great way off.

Some time ago I was in a bookshop and I picked up a cheap edition of George Eliot's book, *Silas Manor*. I'd known the name, I'd never read it, and I found it an absorbing book. George Eliot was a woman, by the way, and she was the author of some famous books, one of which is *Silas Manor*, *The Miser*.

It's impossible to give you anything like a picture of the story, but he lived alone, and his most precious possession was his gold. He hid it in a certain, in the earth, in a corner of his cottage, and every day he counted out his gold. It was his joy and delight, the only delight he had in life.

And then one evening there was some emergency and he had to go out to attend to something. And he left his door open. He'd never had any visitors before.

He was largely left alone. He certainly had no thieves around, and he thought because he'd never had them before, he never would have any at any time. And carelessly he left the door open.

And then a character in the story was passing, and he went into the cottage of Silas Manor, and he found the pot of gold. And by the time Silas Manor came back, it was gone. A bigger blow couldn't have happened to that man.

And then it is that the authoress, George Eliot, as was customary in books, I imagine, of Victorian age, she does a little bit of moralising. And I was most interested in her bit of moralising at that time. This is what she said.

You see, Silas Manor had felt so secure. Why? Because it had never happened before, and he assumed therefore it would never happen in the future. And she says, the sense of security for us, more frequently springs from habit than from conviction.

The lapse of time during which a given event has not happened is according to this logic of habit constantly alleged as a reason why the event should never happen, even when the lapse of time is precisely the added condition which makes the event imminent. Understand that? By the law of statistics. If you've never had an accident in your car, that's the more likely one's coming up very soon.

And that sense of security, based on the fact it's never happened before, is no security at all. And she gives an instance, not of a car, but she says, for instance, a man will tell you that he's worked in a mine unhurt by an accident, as a reason why he should apprehend no danger, even though the roof is beginning to sink. And it is often observable that the older a man gets, the more difficult it is for him to retain a believing conception of his own death.

It's always a great way off. This or that calamity could never happen to me. How come? Why? Because it's never happened before.

But by the law of statistics, if it's never happened before, that calamity makes its likelihood all the more imminent in our case. And so it is, we defer getting right with God, making our peace with him on the simple thing that he and that event is a great way off. It's true.

It might be true, a great way off. It might not be. It might be quite near.

But even it is a great way off, that fact is not to be taken as a reason for doing nothing, but a golden opportunity for you to do the one thing you could do. And what is that? What this man did, he says, it's a great way off, my chance. Before he gets any further, let me send a delegation and humbly ask for conditions of peace.

And while he, friend, is yet a great way off, while you think nothing's ever going to happen to you for years and years, you're not to take that as an argument for doing nothing, but rather as a golden opportunity,

while he's yet a great way off, to do the one thing you can do, to go to him and ask humbly for conditions of peace, to give yourself up, show yourself on mercy, if there is such for a sinner like you, and ask for conditions of peace. And I want to tell you, a sinner has never gone to God and asked for conditions of peace, then he's found those conditions marvellously generous. He says, come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord, though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.

Though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. The idea of forgiveness is not yours, it's his. He said, hey, I've got a suggestion for you.

What about the forgiveness? What about cleansing? What about the blotting out of those things that stand against you in the books of heaven? Because this is his great prerogative. This is that which he delights to do. He delighteth in mercy.

And I want to tell you, there was a time when I knew that God and any catastrophic encounter with him was a great way off. At the age of 18, I had the ball at my feet. But I came to a holiday camp here in Southfield.

I don't know why. I could have said, oh, he's a great way off, I'll just leave it. I don't want to become a Christian.

I don't want to surrender my life to him. But the Holy Spirit had been working in my heart. I'd been on the run for too long.

I thought I couldn't last three whole weeks in that boys' house party connected with the beach services at Southfield. And one night I asked for conditions of peace. And I did it.

Not when I was croaking and lame and ill or near to death. But while all that was a great way off, I took my chance. I went to Jesus for the cleansing power and I asked for conditions of peace.

I was a rebel. And I want to tell you it was on the seafront at this little place of Southfield. I got away from the meeting.

I walked up and down and said, Jesus, would you give a sinner conditions of peace? And he gave them. He gave me eternal life. He gave the forgiveness of my sins.

He gave me a whole new inside. The same chassis but a new engine. And it all happened on that seafront here in Southfield.

So there's the first word. While it's a great way off, do it. The young people haven't done it.

They think they've got plenty of time. You haven't. Has it ever happened to me before? Yes.

True. But the fact that nothing's ever happened might be a reason why something will happen. You better get right with God now.

End of the night. You can ask this gracious saviour of men for his conditions of peace. And you'll find them infinitely generous.

But then we turn over to the other parable. And that's that famous one in Luke 15. Not only... In the first we had the story of the approaching king.

Here, the returning prodigal. And that father had been waiting for him. I like to think that he found his wife, he found mum, in the kitchen, making up a food parcel to send to that boy in the far country.

He said, you do nothing of the sort. The sooner that boy feels a pinch of hunger, the sooner we'll have him back. And in great expectancy that hunger would come to him, and poverty, he went up every day to the roof of his house, scanning the horizon to see if there was any sign of him returning.

And one day, a poor bedraggled figure was seen on the skyline. And as soon as that old man saw it, he said, it's my boy! And advanced in years as he was, he picked up his old eastern robe and hitched it up, and that old man, with everything flying, ran as fast as he could over the intervening distance. Yes, it was his boy.

And when he saw him, his heart well with compassion for the poor lad and the condition he'd got himself in. There was no reproach against him. He fell on his neck, he kissed him, and he was wonderfully restored to a proper relationship, a happy relationship to his father.

Please turn the cassette over now. Do not fast-wind it in either direction. And he was wonderfully restored to a proper relationship, a happy relationship to his father in that moment.

All that had gone wrong was erased. And he was assured that not for one moment had his father's love for him altered, and now he was back in his father's arms. And he couldn't be better related to his father than he was in that moment.

Listen. And all that while he was still afar off, still in rags, still smelling of the pigsty, still impoverished, a wreck of a person. He was a long way off.

There was still some distance to go, but in that faraway place, he was reconciled utterly and completely to his father. And what distance needed to be traversed? He was going to traverse it in the company with his father, helped on by the loving arm of his father. And he did it as one who was completely restored to his father.

And you know, the moment you make up your mind, I want to be a Christian. I'm not one really. I've been one big phony.

I've been going my own way, running my own life, I've been politely turning away from the overtures of Jesus. But the moment you make up your mind, it's happening maybe in the very seat where you're sitting. Somebody got saved the other week, who made that decision.

And the moment you make up your mind, I want to be a Christian. And the moment you begin to repent and put yourself in the wrong, most important, you can only be saved as the wrong one. Nobody else will be blamed but yourself.

And the moment you begin to do that very feebly, you can hardly call it a big real repentance, it's been so minimal, but you're beginning to humble yourself as another. And God sees you. And he runs to meet you.

He falls on your neck. He gives you the kiss of reconciliation. And I want to tell you, you couldn't be more right with God than you are in that moment.

And all this happens while you are still a long way off. You're still mixed up. You don't understand it all.

You don't understand yourself. You don't understand what's happening. You've still got, it seems, the rags of sin on you.

The smell of the world is still on you. You don't know much about the Bible. But while you are yet a great way off, the Father runs to meet any man who begins to repent.

And he gives him a welcome and an infusion of divine grace out of all proportion to the little bit of repenting he did. I'm amazed how quickly it happens. Sometimes I found that Father running to meet me and restoring me.

I can't say it was a very big repent. I just felt down. So come and answer to your prayer.

Lord, I haven't prayed. I'm too weak to pray. But you did sigh.

Yes Lord, I sighed. That's your prayer. That's your repentance.

And you get treatment from Jesus, from God, Father and Holy Spirit when you begin, even in the smallest measure to repent, out of all proportion to those small steps of repentance you take. And there in that far country you are as restored to God by grace as you ever can be. The first story, you could write over it, those words from Amos.

Prepare to meet thy God while he is yet a great way off. Prepare to meet him. Ask the conditions of peace.

That's the first story. But the second is, not prepare to meet thy God, but God is prepared to meet you. And you can come.

You haven't got to get it straight. You haven't got to get your prayer properly phrased. You haven't got to conform to some bit of new religion you're taking on.

In that muddle in which you see yourself to be there, he runs. Everything's going to change after it. Yes, there are things to be put right.

There are things about which you may have to ask other people to forgive you. But whatever needs to be done, you're going to do as one who's already been forgiven, already restored, and you're going to do in his company and in his strength. And the great thing happened while you were still a long way off.

I've heard some pretty feeble prayers in my time prayed by penitents. I didn't mind. I know God didn't mind.

He's taking the low place. He's becoming a candidate for the grace that flows from the cross. And it happens.

Every time. If only there was the smallest bit of admitting you've been wrong. He runs to meet you.

Someone has said that father running to meet that son is a picture of the only time when God who has all eternity in which to work is in a hurry. I tell you he is. He's in a hurry.

The moment you begin to change your attitude and say I've been wrong. I've not only been rebelling against God, I've been rebelling against mum and dad. If you've been rebelling against mum and dad, you have been rebelling against God.

The moment you admit the wrong of it, he runs without any more condemnation with complete forgiveness and restoration. It's a wonderful picture of the gospel. But you say, I've often wondered about the story of the prodigal son.

You say it's a picture of the gospel. But where is Jesus in the parable of the prodigal son? I'll tell you where he is. In that dad, with clothes flying, running to meet that boy.

That is Jesus. Jesus is God running to meet us. Emmanuel, God with us.

In him God brought down to us. That's Jesus. In him already the distance between you and God has been bridged.

The mighty gulf God spanned at Calvary, it's already been spanned. And Jesus is God already running to meet you. And it only needs you to begin to take the place of the sinner, admit yourself to being the wrong one.

And he's there. And he's got you. And you have got him.

This is a wonderful illustration of the mercy of God. I'm a great lover, as some of you know, of this little book, Daily Light. June 11 in the morning is our text.

You know the little book with the leading text each morning, each evening, and related text. Without any comment at all because it doesn't need it, yet the very juxtaposition of texts speaks volumes. What about this one? Leading text.

And he arose and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, the father saw him and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. Next verse.

The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, plenteous in mercy. He will not always chide, dear one, neither will he keep his anger forever. He hath not dealt with us after our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.

What a beautiful poem. This is a picture of the mercy of God. The God of the old as well as the God of the new.

Mercy there is great and grace was free. Pardon there was multiplied to me. And so it was that that boy who'd found the way out to the far country a long way discovered the way back was a quick way.

I imagine he thought that because it was a long way out it would be a long way back. Perhaps he wondered whether he'd ever make it. He was so footsore.

But because his father ran to meet him when he was yet a long way out, he discovered that although it was a long way out, it was a quick way back. It always is. You think, unless you're very unlike me, because it's been a long way out, it will have to be a long way back.

Can't expect it quickly. What took you away? It was sin that took you away into that far country. What will bring you back? Well, you see, being good will.

And if you think being good is going to bring you back, it's going to be a long way back. I wonder if you'll ever make it, if you'll ever be good enough. But that's not the way back.

We go out by sin, but we come back by the blood of Jesus. And that's God's wonderful, quick way back. Jesus on the cross, as he shed that blood, said, It's finished.

Nothing more for man to do. I've done it all. But if you think that you've got to turn over a new leaf and keep it up for so long before you'll find your way back, you're ignoring the value of the blood of Jesus.

But that blood tells me it's finished. God's satisfied with what it did. And thus it is, I've got good news for you tonight.

Though it's a long way out. It's always a quick way back, provided you are prepared to say, I'm the fellow that's wrong. I heard an old Sankey hymn once, which hardly ever sung.

It was on the radio. It was only a step to Jesus. The chorus was that.

Only a step, only a step. Then why not take it now? And in the verse I caught one line, a beautiful line, I've never forgotten it. Only a step from sin to grace.

If the passage is from sin to a victorious life, it's not only a step. I don't know how many steps. But if it's from sin to grace, in view of the fact that grace is God's love, for those that don't deserve it, in the very nature of the case, it's only a step.

That step where you take the place of the wrong one and you see all that grace has done for you in sending Jesus and that precious blood being shed, and you're back. You cannot be more back with God than what the blood of Jesus makes you when you call sin, sin. And this applies to us Christians.

This has been a lifesaver for me, I can tell you. A long way out. Getting colder and colder.

But hallelujah! It's a quick way back. This is what the prodigal son found. And he found he was gloriously restored to his father when he was still a great way off, when he still had to change his clothes, when he still had adjustments to make, and it's the same with you.

If in your seat you say, I'm the wrong one, Lord, I'm giving in at last, you cannot then be more right with God than what the blood of Jesus Christ makes you. And you'll be surprised at this extraordinary paradox. A long way out.

But hallelujah! A quick way back. Thousands are found this way. He doesn't stand you in a corner as a punishment.

The blood of Jesus brings you right from the far country into the holy of holies of God's presence and you lose your burdens on Calvary's hill. And here in Southwold, he met me like that. While I was still a long way out, I didn't know the Bible, I'd been battling away against God, but there on the sea front, I found the quick way back.

I came back by the blood and I was able to give a testimony the next day. And you too. And so here we have our little picture.

The two parables in which I get that phrase, while he was yet a great way off, yes, I'd like to feel he is, the calamities and the encounters are a great way off, but now is your time to ask for conditions of peace. You've hardly got over the hill, back to God before he's run to meet you. While you were still a great way off.

And so you need to make your choice. It's amazing how many times people come to our conference along with other Christians without being Christians themselves and they come again and again. I don't know how long a certain man I'm thinking of came.

Year after year. His wife loved the Lord, but he wasn't right with God and made no move. And one day I went into this prayer room back here.

Not about six or seven years he'd been. And there was this man of all men kneeling down at the chair. I said, you brother? Me, he said, at last.

And he told me that though he'd had a Christian wife and we all thought she was a bright and shining Christian. He said, for the first time today, my wife told me she was wrong in a matter and asked me to give her. And that's done something for me.

And sometimes that's what can help somebody else. You never really got right with the Lord or with that husband or wife. Anyway, and while he was still a great way off, Jesus ran to him and met him.

And this is our opportunity. In a moment we're going to close. And as we break up you're going to have your chance of seeking the Lord in that prayer room as others have.

I'll tell you how you do it. You say to your companion, wait for me. You go on and have nightcap.

I've got business to do. And you walk one foot after another. Others may see you.

You go down that corridor. The door on the left marked prayer room. And you, young or old, you walk right in.

And there's a chair there. And you kneel down at that chair. One of the team will be glad to see you and have a prayer with you.

I'm sure that's helpful. But that was I found. There he was.

Eddie Stride had laboured with him. He'd been with us since Cleveland days. And only that night did he ask for conditions of peace.

And he got them. And he's happy in the Lord today and so is at home. And that wife is so glad that she did repent of whatever needed to be repented.

He was touched by it. Let us pray. Lord Jesus, we thank you for this lovely old gospel of thine.

Thank you for not requiring of us the impossible. Running to meet us in our misery with our broken promises. You don't want any promises from us.

You just want us. You'll do the rest. And we ask that thou would help some to make that response.

Even tonight. We ask it in thy name. Amen.

Now let's sing the last two verses of 436. 436 verses 3 and 4. No preparation can I make. My best resolves I only break.

Yet save me for thine own name's sake. You understand? The last two verses. No preparation can I make.

My best resolves I only break. Yet save me for thine own name's sake. And take me as I am.

And take me as I am. I sigh for thee. Heal with me as thou seest me.

Thy work begin. Thy work complete. And take me as I am.

I only break. I sigh for thee. We're going to park quietly.

And some will be having their nightcap. I'm sure they'll keep some for you if you want to stay and pray in the prayer room for a few moments. Don't forget there's the early morning prayer meeting.

Not all that early. Ten to eight in the room here. Overflow room.

Eight o'clock in the tent. At the camp tomorrow morning. Let's be praying that the Holy Spirit shall move right the way through our party at all ages, all levels.

Could we rise, say Lord, may not one go home unblessed. I've known some parties, house parties where every last one was either saved or richly blessed and liberated as Christian. And he loves to do it as he sees us, earnestly wanting it, expressing it in prayer.

So we praise the Lord. Right, we're going to bow our heads and say the grace together. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, evermore.

Amen.

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