

## **There is Another King: Jesus**

*Luke – Acts*

### **How the Father Looks**

*Luke 15:11 – 32*

#### **Introduction: Your Father's Face**

This weekend, we want to experience God. There are some things that I know God wants to do with us. We're going to start off establishing some basics and get deeper throughout this weekend. We're going to see tonight How the Father Looks. How does he appear to us? Tomorrow morning, we're going to see How the Father Loves. How exactly does He love us? And how does He give Himself to us?

Throughout this evening, I'm going to ask you to enter into a story with me, a story that Jesus told about a father and two sons, and to imagine the face of this father. But to start with, I want you to picture the face of your father. Whatever the image in your mind, that is the image that we tend to project onto God, subconsciously or even consciously. And that's one of the things that needs to be completed or even healed, even if it's a happy or positive image. What we really need to know about God is never fully provided by our natural fathers.

Let me tell you first about my experience. My dad was a good provider. He worked at an electronics and defense company, TRW, that he didn't really like. I'm fairly sure he hit some glass ceilings because he isn't white. But he never complained. We weren't as wealthy as some people around us, but I never had to worry about finances. Partially for that reason, I don't struggle a lot with trusting God as my heavenly Father to provide for me, even when my wife and I are raising our kids in the inner city, taking fairly low paying jobs.

But my dad was also a fairly angry person especially when I was younger. He often got drunk. I remember always trying to do my homework without asking my dad for help because he would get mad at me for not knowing already. And then when he drove me to school the next morning, he would quiz me in math problems. If I didn't know something, he'd get mad! I was afraid of my dad. When I was about nine years old, there was a boy a few years older than me who lived two houses down from me. We had a few things in common, like dirt bike riding and drawing. Unfortunately, he had stumbled onto his father's stash of Playboy magazines, and he would invite me over to his house to look through them while both his parents worked outside the home full time. Even though I was young, I had a vague uneasiness about this. Nevertheless, I did it a few times. Then we got caught. My friend, who had taken to drawing sexual acts on paper, left one of his drawings in my desk drawer, where my parents found it. Needless to say, they were upset. They held that paper and looked down at me with a piercing stare. I remember feeling a sense of shame, dread, and confusion. All of a sudden, there seemed to be this huge distance, this Grand Canyon, between me and my parents. My dad's face especially was stoic – no expression – and then it became angry. Fortunately, I couldn't draw that well, so my parents knew that I didn't do it! When they questioned me about it, I confessed that it was that particular friend, and I also told them about the magazines. I wanted that huge distance between us to be closed. There was no 'We're glad you told us about this.' There was no explanation for why they reacted so strongly. They didn't talk to me later about sex (Do any 1<sup>st</sup> generation Asian parents??? Did yours???). They just took the drawing from me, forbade me from playing with that boy, and told his parents about the discovery. We never spoke of it again. I was left feeling distant and ashamed: And though my relationship with my dad has changed over the years, still, that's the image that left an impression on me.

As a result, I usually think of God being angry or without expression. Now that becomes a problem for me because when I make a mistake, is it easy for me to come to God? Not really. Now for you, what does your father's face look like in your mind? Is it a happy face? A loving face? A suffering face? Or is it stoic? Is it angry? Maybe a variety of expressions. Maybe none because you didn't really know your dad? Maybe it's just a face that you don't respect, kind of a lazy face? Maybe a tired and 'I'm overworked – don't bother me' face? And what are the implications for you? We'll explore that throughout our time this weekend. This question is important, because we want to look into God's face, especially tonight: 'How does God feel about us as our father?' We're going to look at a story tonight that may be familiar to you, but which might just come alive again. So, in your mind, bring up an empty canvas, and begin sketching with me.

### **The Dinner Party of Jesus**

Let's set the scene, because this is a story within a story. Jesus and his disciples are making a journey from Galilee to the city of Jerusalem. As Jesus heads south, he stops at the small house of a friend, and throws a dinner party in this friend's honor, in typical Middle Eastern style. Perhaps there was lamb, all kinds of bread, cheese, fruit, and wine. But what is not typical about this dinner party are the guests. One of the guests is a woman, who wears her long hair down as a brazen advertisement of her services. She's the town prostitute. And Jesus, being the hospitable host that he is, showers her with compliments. 'Oh fair daughter of Jerusalem, welcome.' She hesitates in surprise at Jesus' generous face, and then takes a seat. Then in walks an angry young man; he's half Jewish and half Roman, a Roman soldier, and by the jewelry that he wears, apparently gay. Jesus the host again showers this guest with a compliment. 'We have a mighty son of Rome here. Welcome!' The young man mutters something in reflex and sits down. Then a tax collector with shifty eyes comes in, and soon enough, Jesus is surrounded by a rag-tag group of folks from off the beaten path of life. The conversations flow this way and that. Jesus talks about the kingdom of God. More questions come. And Jesus' sparkling eyes are moist because of his joy over these people. Their hearts are softening. Then, another group of guests arrives at the door. They're the party-pooping Pharisees, those nationalistic and religious elitists. Their eyes narrow as they see Jesus sitting at the table with that bunch of rabble. They began to grumble amongst themselves, saying, 'This man claims to be a holy man, but look at him! He sits with sinners and tax collectors, and even eats with them.' Now Jesus considers the situation, and considers how everyone in that room need him. How would he respond? Out of his genius comes a mind-boggling response. He says, 'Listen, I have a story to tell you about a father.'

### **The Younger Son**

'A certain man had two sons.' It starts off typically enough. There is a Jewish father and his two sons. The setting is a farming home out in the country. 'And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' And he divided his wealth between them.' Right away the story takes an unexpected turn into unexpected heartache. Already, the people at Jesus' dinner party must have been leaning forward in disbelief, because they had just heard three things that were impossible in their culture. First, it was impossible that the younger son would demand his inheritance from his father. Second, it was impossible that the older son did not step in and mediate this. And third, no father would actually give in to such a request. Let's look at this in more detail.

The younger son says, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' Now what did that mean back then? There is a man named Dr. Kenneth Bailey, who has spent almost twenty years studying people in small villages from all over the Middle East, from Morocco to India, from Turkey to Sudan. He's tried to get to the bottom of this. He's conducted interviews that typically go like this:

'Has anyone ever made such a request in your village?'

'Never!'

'Could anyone ever make such a request?'

'Impossible!'

'If anyone ever did, what would happen?'

'His father would beat him, of course!'

'Why?'

'This request means -- he wants his father to die!'

In these small villages where the culture hasn't changed much over the years, people say the same thing. There is no way any son would be so disrespectful as to ask his father for his inheritance. Inheritances were given when the father died. And back then, in Jesus' day, when things were maybe even stricter, when the father was the undisputed head of the house, and when his word was law, asking for your inheritance was unimaginable. This is not teenage defiance in today's America where the father says, 'No allowance for you.' This is a culture where the father could punish with death. Fathers (in Israel, according to Deuteronomy) were allowed to take their defiant, disrespectful children to the city gates and gather a crowd to stone that child to death. And yet here we have unbridled selfishness coming out of a young man who essentially says, 'Dad, I wish you were dead, because I just want the money coming to me. Give it to me now.'

What's more, look at what he's tossing away. He's throwing away the land God gave him. Land was what you inherited, and what you would pass on to your children, and this boy wants to throw it away, and sell it for

money, just for himself. So he's also throwing away his place in his family, but also his place in the community. He's turning his back on his entire neighborhood.

For anyone listening to Jesus, they would have thrown up. They would have booed this punk off stage. Unbelievable! In fact, this scenario is so impossible to the Middle Eastern mind that Bailey says, 'To my knowledge, in all of Middle Eastern literature (aside from this parable) from ancient times to the present, there is no case of any son, older or younger, asking for his inheritance from a father who is still in good health.' (*Poet and Peasant*, p.164). What do you think this father will do? At the very least: Explode, beat his son silly, and then send him out to the fields, right?

But no. The father quietly 'divided his wealth between them.' This father brings out what he has and gives his younger son his portion and his older son the other. What is going on?? Either he is the wimpiest father on the face of the earth, or he's insane, or his love for his son runs so deep that even when there is no changing his son's mind, he wants his last act to be an act of kindness. He wants his son to remember that the last look on his face was not rolling his eyes and saying, 'I don't know what else to do!' but a piercing look of love. He probably looked straight into his eyes and with his eyes said, 'You're making a terrible mistake, but I love you.' His son totally rejects him, but he totally loves his son. You wouldn't easily forget his face. Who is this father?

Actually, he was father rejected by both of his sons. What about the older son? The older son had a responsibility according to the culture of his time to step in and try to resolve the conflict. It's not proper for a son to fight with his father, and so the rest of the family, namely this older son, was supposed to become a mediator. But what did he do? Nothing. Apparently, he just stood by while the father took everything he had and gave it over to his sons. The younger son pockets his share, and the older son stretches out his hands, too. You see, the younger son committed the active sin, saying that he wished his father was dead. But the older son committed the passive sin, standing by being aloof, wearing a long face while he also took what he wanted. He rejected his father too. It's subtle, but it's there.

So, the younger son takes a few days and sells his share of the land for money. And then, with coins clinking in his pockets, he sets out on an adventure. 'And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living.' What is loose living? We in the twentieth century can imagine what loose living really means. But notice there are countless tales of heartache and sin that Jesus passes over in that one breath. What Jesus cares about is not so much the sin. It's the changing of the heart, the turning back, the saying, 'I'm sorry,' the repentance that's yet to come.

So Jesus picks up the story again when this guy is flat broke. 'Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be in need.' That wasn't unusual. The land of Israel and its surroundings had famines all the time. But what WAS unusual was for a Jewish man to be so desperate as to do THIS: 'And he went and attached himself to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he was longing to fill his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him.' He literally goes and GLUES HIMSELF (kollao), he UNITES HIMSELF, to a citizen of that foreign country. That's horrible, because the pagan neighbors of the Jews were backwards idol worshipers. This is like renting a room from a lousy family. Then the younger son finds a lousy job because he's so desperate: feeding pigs. Those animals! That's an all time low. Jews thought pigs were taboo and unclean. They didn't want to eat them, touch them, or be near them. But now, the son needs to stand there and feed them and take care of them. He has totally disinherited himself and everything he had ever held dear.

No one cares about him in this foreign land. Just like immigrants often get treated in this country when they do janitorial jobs, people probably pass him by and say, 'Foreigner. Worthless.' Especially during a famine, when pigs are more important than people, this guy had nothing. He's not in Israel any more, so there's no law from God protecting the poor and the homeless. He gets jealous of the pigs because they eat better than him. He's got to be reflecting on the bitter irony in his life. He rejected his father, but he gets rejected by everyone. He turned his back on his family, his inheritance, his future, and his place in the community. Everyone turned their backs on him. He wanted to be independent. Everyone expects him to be independent. He is alone and desperate in a country where no one knows him and no one cares. He was probably saying to himself, 'I guess what goes around comes around.'

When everything has gone wrong, what do we do? When we're broken and hurting and lonely and needy, there is one thought: 'Daddy.' Verse 17: 'But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men.'''

This is an important moment. Jesus says 'when he came to his senses.' Literally in Greek it is 'but having come to himself.' In the Bible, the person who comes to herself or himself is the person who realizes who they really are, and what they've really done, and how much they really need forgiveness and a chance to start life over with God at the very center of life. How sad it is that we moderns think that finding yourself is about running away and throwing off all restraints and indulging yourself. Finding yourself is finding yourself in need of Jesus.

What's also commendable about this younger son is that he is now honest and says, 'I have sinned.' Those are some key words. If I were in his shoes, I might still be saying, 'I was just unlucky. I would have made it if it weren't for some bad friends that took my money. I would have made it if it weren't for that famine. I would have made it if the deal on Texas hold 'em went another way. I would have made it if my dad gave me more money, or more education. Or if I just didn't get caught.' But the son doesn't blame anyone else. He says, 'I have sinned. I was wrong.'

Notice that the younger son can't even hope to be a son again. He cut off that possibility by insulting his father. His father could beat him and even have him killed, legally speaking. The best he can hope for is to be hired as a servant and rent a room and be treated as a second class citizen. That is not humility. That is the best possible case. Notice that he thinks he can work his way back into being accepted. An amazing thought considering the insult he's dealt his father.

So he rehearses his speech, and can you imagine how scared he must feel? His last words to his father were, 'I wish you were dead.' And he is betting everything on the chance that his father will take him in again and protect him from justice. He is hoping that the last look on his father's face, that look of mercy, will still be there. The last look on his father's face was love. What will be on his face now?

So in v.20, 'And he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him, and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him, and kissed him. This father is full of surprises. First of all, his father sees him while he is just a speck on the horizon. The father is probably working in the fields, and the only reason he sees his son from a long way off is that he's been watching every day, constantly, hoping that his lost son would return. Then, one day, 'Could that be him?'

Then what? Does he feel anger in his heart? Vengeance? No. He was filled with compassion. Literally, his insides (lit. *intestines*) ached (because in those days they thought the intestines were associated with the feelings). His insides ached with love for his son. And what does this father do next? Does he ignore the son? Does he turn around and march right back into the house and make the son come crawling back to the door, knocking plaintively and begging on his hands and knees so that everyone could see his shame and the father's power? Does he increase the distance between them? No. He does the opposite. He closes that distance as fast as he can. He runs.

Have you ever seen an old man run? There are some old men that run around the course outside my office building; it's not too pretty. Why does the father run? Because he knows what would happen to the son. Bailey says that the son will probably be mocked by a crowd from the community. As soon as he's close enough to be recognized, he'll be slandered by the whole town, and a mob will gather on either side of the road back to the house. As the son walks back with his head down, he'll have all kinds of nasty things said at him. They might even throw stones or push him... He'll run a gauntlet to get home. So the father looks at the rest of the village and knows the rejection and shame his son will face at the hands of a mob like that. What the father does in the homecoming is to protect that boy.

And at what a cost. In the Middle East or throughout Asia, a nobleman with flowing robes never runs anywhere. To do so is humiliating. Ben Sirach said, 'A man's manner of walking tells you who he is.' Aristotle said, 'Great men never run in public.' But what this father does is surely pick up his robes in public, bares his legs in

public, and runs in public. He draws all the attention to himself in the most self-humiliating thing a dignified man could do. He runs. All his neighbors must have said, 'What is going on?' This father runs the gauntlet that his son should have run. He takes all the shame on himself. The younger son, walking down the road expecting little stones and venomous words to be thrown at him, instead hears dead silence except for the running footsteps of his dad. And does his face look the same? No. This time, tears are streaming down his face.

This is one of the clearest foreshadowings of God on the Cross. When God in Jesus Christ went to the Cross, He was humiliated. Yet his self-sacrifice silenced all other accusing voices. He drew it all into himself, puncturing through sin and death for us so that we would come through with him into God's deep love for us.

Then, the father reaches his son, and wraps his arms around him, and kissed his cheeks over and over. I would have paid money to see the look on this son's face! His last word was a slap to his father's face. But this father's love runs so deep, that when you slap his face, he kisses yours.

Look at the amazing sequence of five action verbs this father does. He sees, he feels, he ran, he embraced, and he kissed. All the action is his. The son hasn't even said anything, and the father showers him with protection and love! Who is this father??

Well the son recovers from his shock and manages to stammer out his rehearsed little speech. He says a little bit, and then he can't finish. 'And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' Notice that he doesn't complete his speech, probably because his father has just welcomed him back with an earth-shattering welcome as a full son, and he doesn't dare insult his father by asking for a job. Maybe he's just choked up so that he can't go on. This is more than he could have possibly expected. Here is where his heart breaks. At this moment, this son realizes how deeply his father loves him, and there is no more that he can say. All he can do is stand there and wonder how he could have rejected his father in the first place.

It's funny how we think we can 'do good deeds' to make up for 'bad deeds.' If my son hit his sister and then came to me and said, 'I'll clean my room,' then I'd say, 'Good try, but really the only thing you can do is to say, 'I'm sorry.' The idea that good deeds can make up for bad deeds is wrong.

Just to show how unique this father is, let's compare stories. In Buddhist literature, there is a story much like this one, where a son insults his father, leaves home, and returns desperate. He says, 'Make me a hired hand on your land.' That father says, 'Ok.' He tests the son, tests his loyalty, tests his sincerity, maintains a sense of distance, waiting to see what the son says next. But the father in Jesus' story is not like that.

While his son is silent, the father bursts out. He calls for a full-on homecoming party. 'But the father said to the slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring out the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again. He was lost, and has been found.' And they began to be merry.'

Each of the things the father bestows on the son is a priceless sign of full acceptance. The best robe is certainly the father's own robe. This is no small thing. Wearing the father's robe insures that the son will be accepted as a part of the family again. Wearing the father's ring insures that the son can do business for the father and has his full trust. Wearing sandals means that the son is above the servants, who go barefoot. No one could possibly challenge the son's position in the family. Then there's a big party, a homecoming, where everyone in the village would be a witness to this full restoration. The father even brings out the best veal: the fattened calf! So the music plays and the dances spin, and everyone in the community comes in and celebrates with the father, because this father is joyful.

Notice something very important. This father is so joyful, he isn't afraid to show it in public in front of everyone. My goodness. Most of us grow up wishing our father would publicly show how proud of us he is because we've done something great. This father publicly shows his love because his son has done something greater: He's said, 'I'm sorry.'

That makes the difference between death and life. His son had been dead. Not metaphorically dead, living somewhere in the gutter, but dead in the deepest sense, in the heart, because the heart of this younger son was calloused, selfish and closed to the father. But now he is alive--truly alive--because he is alive to his father.

### **The Older Son**

But out there working in the fields is someone who is not joyful: the older son. Verse 25: 'Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things might be. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, [this is the best food I've ever had!] because he has received him back safe and sound.'

But how does the older brother react? Is he joyful? No. 'But he became angry, and was not willing to go in.' Now, this older brother is starting to show his true colors. First of all, he became angry. A lot of us might feel like the older brother had the right to be angry, because he had always done his duties, he had always worked hard, and besides, being suspicious is the right thing to do in these kinds of situations. But in reality, he doesn't have the right to be angry. He hasn't talked to his younger brother to see if he's really changed. He doesn't talk to his father to find out the real story from the father's perspective. Instead, he jumps to a conclusion, and he jumps to judge. This is so much like me, because so many times I jump to a conclusion without getting all the facts.

What's even more interesting is to remember that this older son didn't always do his duties. He didn't care about the relationship between his brother and his father, he stretched out his hands to take his own share of the inheritance, he stood by and just let it all happen. He didn't care about how his father might have felt then, he didn't share in his father's hurt. He saw how his father looked: Everyday he stared at the horizon with moist eyes. This older son did his 'duties' but he failed in the greatest duty of all: Love. He didn't share his father's heart. And that's the real issue here. If he loved his father, he would be happy, because his father is happy. The problem is, he doesn't really know his father.

Second, the older son was not willing to go into the house. He stood outside where everyone could see him sulking at this party. I imagine him striking a James Dean type pose leaning against a doorpost. Do you know what the older son is doing to the father? He is making a public statement against him. You don't disagree with your father in public, especially in the Middle East! If the older son had concerns, he should have waited until the end of the party to discuss them. In the meantime, he should have gone into the party, embraced and congratulated his younger brother like his father had, and showed special honor to the brother as the honored guest. You don't argue publicly with your father when guests are present. (*Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes*, p.195) But this son does. What is now clear as day is that there is a break between the older son and the father. It is serious, because this is public, and everyone can see him.

So what does the father do? Does he order his son to come in? No. Verse 28 says, 'his father came out and began entreating him.' Entreating is also translated 'to invite, to appeal.' He is appealing to reason, to love, to family. He is kind to his son, even in this moment of insolence.

But what does the son do? He now points his finger at his father, and launches into a speech of his own. 'But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving you, and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a kid [a goat], that I might be merry with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with harlots, you killed the fattened calf for him.' There are so many things we can tell about the older son from that speech. Let's point out three.

First, the older son tries to quantify the relationship. He says, 'Maybe you should pay me for all I do for you.' If I were that father, I would have said, 'Maybe you should pay me for all I do for you. How about rent, food, clothes, education, and care?'

Second, he's thinking only about himself. Look how many times he says the words 'I' or 'me' or 'my.' Five times in one sentence! 'I want a party! I want my friends over! I've never gotten veal!' His eyes are totally focused on himself. He doesn't even see the change that's happened to his younger brother. In fact, he says that

he's spent the money on prostitutes, but how does he know that for sure? He doesn't know; he's just throwing out his angry speculations.

Third, the older brother separates himself from his younger brother. He says to his father, 'This son of yours.' When one of our kids is difficult, Ming and I will look at each other jokingly and say, 'He's YOUR son. He gets that from YOU' 'Oh, there goes YOUR daughter again.' The older brother does the same thing. He wants to separate himself from his brother, maybe even from the family in general.

Finally, the older son judges his own father. He accentuates the finger pointing by saying 'you, you, you' which means that he holds his father responsible for the whole thing. He sees his father as someone who just gives him things to do, a taskmaster, and so because he's done all his chores, he feels like he should get paid. He forgets the reality, that everything the father has is his. But because he has the attitude of a servant, not a son, he criticizes his father like a boss.

Let's step back and look at this older son. Earlier, he passively wanted his father dead to get his own inheritance, and now he actively insults his father in public by staying outside. This son, in his heart, is just as disobedient as the other son was; he just never ran away from home to show it. But now, he shows who he really is.

And if I were the father, because I'm sensitive to public humiliation, I would have put that son in a headlock, locked him in his room without dinner, and waited until he begged me for forgiveness. How dare he say all that in public, in front of guests! In most families, everyone knows you don't air your dirty laundry in public.

But what does this father do? Something amazing. He uses one of the tenderest words: 'teknon,' which means 'dear child.' You know what I would have said? 'Listen, you idiot, who pays for your clothes, your rent, your food, your bed, and the roof over your head? If I pay you a salary, you pay me for everything! Furthermore, I already gave you your share, which you so eagerly TOOK. Any of these calves are yours. Go ahead and throw the party. What's stopping you, you ungrateful whiner?!?' But the father doesn't say that at all. He could have won the argument easily. But even after this extreme public insult, the father swallows the humiliation and reaches out in love to this angry son. 'Dear child.' Then he reminds him, 'You're more than a servant. You are a full heir of my house, if you don't reject it.' Verse 31: 'You have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours.' That's the outrageous thing about this older son. He is a full son, but he wants to be just a hired field worker.

Then the father reminds him how special this day is, something the older brother had missed completely. 'We had to be merry and rejoice, for this brother of yours [notice that he's not letting his older son get away so easily!] was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.' Why does the father use the words dead or alive and lost or found? Why is the father a little repetitious here? Because this older son is also dead and lost. He also needs to recognize how much his father loves him. The father knew about this rejection, even before it was made visible in public. Nevertheless, the father is doing everything he can to be merciful to this older son, to be gentle, and to show him publicly how much he respects him.

Then, the story ends. What happens? We don't know. Jesus doesn't tell us whether or not the older brother agrees with his father's love and goes into the party. Why? There is a clue in the structure of the story itself. This story demonstrates a Hebrew structure called the inverted parallel. The first main idea matches with the last main idea, the second main idea matches with the second to last main idea, etc. until you reach the center. Here in the center is the main thrust of the story. This is the structure of the younger son story.

1. There was a man who had two sons and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that falls to me.' And he divided his living between them.	A son is lost
2. Not many days later the younger son sold all he had, journeyed to a far country and wasted his property in loose living.	Goods wasted in loose living
3. And when he had spent everything a great famine arose in that country and he began to be in want.	Everything lost
4. So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country and he sent him to his fields to feed pigs.	Clings to a stranger
5. And he would gladly have eaten the pods which the pigs ate and no one gave him anything.	Total rejection
6. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's servants have bread to spare but I perish here with hunger.	Self-recognition 1 I am perishing
6. I will arise and go to my father and say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you and am no more worthy to be called your son; make me a servant.'	Self-recognition 2 I have sinned
5'. And he arose and came to his father. And while he was at a great distance his father saw him and had compassion and ran and embraced him and kissed him.	Total acceptance
4'. And the son said to the father, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you and am no more worthy to be called your son.'	Clings to his father
3' And the father said to the servants, 'Bring the best robe and put it on him and put a ring on his hands and shoes on his feet.	Everything restored
2'. And bring the fatted calf and kill it and let us eat and make merry	Goods used in celebration
1'. for this son of mine was dead and is alive, he was lost and is found.' And they began to make merry.	A son is found

So clearly the main thrust of that story is to admit your sin so that you can re-enter a relationship with your father. Then here is the structure of the older son:

1. Now the elder son was in the fields, and as he came and drew near to the house he heard music and dancing and he called one of the boys and asked what this meant.	Older brother outside
2. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come and your father has killed the fatted calf because he received him with peace.'	Your brother safe A feast
3. But he was angry and refused to go in so his father came out and was entreating him.	Father entreats
4. But he answered his father, 'Lo these many years I have served you and I have never disobeyed your commandments yet you never gave me a kid to make merry with my friends.	Complaint 1: You don't pay me
4'. But this son of yours came who has devoured your living with harlots you killed for him the fatted calf.'	Complaint 2: You bless him
3'. And he said to him, 'Beloved son, you are always with me and all that is mine is yours.	Father entreats
2'. It was fitting to make merry and be glad for this your brother was dead and is alive, he was lost and is found.'	A feast Your brother safe

Notice that the story is not complete, is it? What would make it complete? The older son's central points are a complaint, as compared to the younger son's central points, a repentance. That corresponds to the final response of both sons. The younger son returns to the father, but the older son does not. So by the structure of the passage, we would expect something like this

[1'. And he remained outside at the door of the house  
refusing the music and dancing  
and rejecting not only his brother, but his father as well.]

Older brother  
outside

Why does Jesus leave off the end of the story? Because he is looking around at the table and he sees tax collectors and sinners, who are clearly like the younger son. They've squandered their lives in loose living, but they're beginning to say, 'Yes, I have sinned.' Then at the door, there are the Pharisees, who don't want to come in. They are just like the older son, who didn't want to come in and join the celebration. So when Jesus leaves the story unfinished, he's really passing the baton over to the Pharisees and saying, 'Here, you finish the story. You condemn the older brother for not coming in. Shouldn't YOU come in?' He makes the Pharisees make a judgment that comes boomeranging back on them. This is the great spontaneous genius of Jesus. That in a moment's notice, he can not only use a Hebrew literary device that is used in the Old Testament [by Samuel, Jonah, as well as Mark's Gospel and Acts], he can totally turn the tables on his opponents.

That leaves only one question about the story. Who is this father? He is patient, responding to rejection by caring even more deeply. He grieves the loss of his child nostalgically, always wanting us to come back to him. He publicly humiliates himself in order to protect his child. He publicly lavishes love on those who do come back to him, showing great respect for his children even when they disobey him. If you thought that there is no human father in the world who is like this, you're right. This father is the God Jesus knows. This is Who we want to know.

Now, what is your story? Are you like the younger son, who has blown it but wants a second chance? Have you wandered far from home? Have you been running around trying to find yourself but coming up short? If you are, then this is what you need to know about God. He is looking for you. God is more welcoming and overjoyed than you could imagine when you step back into relationship with Him. Or are you like the older son? Do you think God should throw you a party because you've been 'good' for SO LONG? Do you find yourself getting cynical or apathetic when God makes Himself relevant to more and more people? 'Well, we'll see if they are for real.' Are you waiting at the door thinking the party should be thrown for you because of your long-standing loyalty, especially when you compare yourself to...you-know-who? If you feel that way, this is what you need to know about God. God wants a big family that shares His heart. God wants His children to be like Him. God's eyes are moist, scanning the horizon all the time.

How does the Father look? The more you want to know, the more He will show you. Can you see Him?