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Series: We'll Leave The Light On For You
Luke 15

May 2, 2010

“Coming Home”
John Ortberg

We're finishing up this series. If you've been around for it, it's Jesus' story, usually called the story of the Prodigal Son. He begins it, "There was a man who had two sons." The main thing you need to know about the man is how much he loved those boys because we've looked at each of the boys, but really this is a story about the father. They were part of a village, and the people in that village thought they had seen love before. But never has a father loved his children like this man loved those two boys from the moment they were born. He was wise, and he was patient, and he was firm, and he was gentle. He was honest, and mostly he was just utterly devoted to them. They broke his heart. They broke his heart.

Now they did it in really different ways. Jesus is telling this to people who have broken God's heart in different ways. In this story, there is a younger child. Now I'm a middle kid in a family of three, and I've always been fascinated by birth order dynamics. It's amazing how just dead accurate Jesus' story is psychologically here.

There is a younger child, and as is often the case, the kid is a free spirit. He is a party waiting to happen. He loves the limelight. He likes it when people pay attention to him. He wants to be the bride at every wedding and the corpse at every funeral. He can light up a room when he wants to be charming. But to tell the truth, he is kind of spoiled. He is kind of immature. He kind of is entitled, kind of impulsive. He is pretty good at getting what he wants. "I'm the baby. Gotta love me!" That's kind of his mantra. That's the baby in the family. Researchers say that's just the way they are.

Then there is the firstborn, the older boy. You know this boy. Follows the rules. Tows the mark. Colors inside the lines. Always made his bed. Always cleaned his room. Always got good grades. Perfectionist. Achiever. Role model. But he was kind of bossy. When they were little, he kind of had a way of making his younger brother feel small and inadequate. People admired him from a distance, but to tell the truth, they didn't always like being around this guy. He was kind of judgmental and proud. He is the firstborn. Researchers say that's just the way they are.

You will notice there is not a middle child in this story. Researchers say middle children tend to be the healthiest and most well adjusted of all the children in the family. So Jesus is just recognizing this reality. It's just in the Bible. You have to deal with it. One day, the younger son shatters the family. "Old man, I'm tired of waiting around for you to die so let's just pretend like you're dead now and give me everything today."

Jesus goes on to say, "Not many days after that, the son gathered all he had." Here is the idea. This is a family with servants and cattle. In that day, they have considerable resources, and it's going to take some time for the father to honor the son's request. He has to liquidate his assets, sell off possessions and livestock and so.

While that's going on, see, that means there is time for the whole village to know what's taking place. This is the topic of conversation for everybody. This is a big deal when a son does this to his father. This is unprecedented. Ken Bailey writes about a first century Jewish custom we'll come back to in just a moment. If a Jewish boy takes his inheritance and loses it among the Gentiles so the Gentiles end up with all the resources that had been a part of Israel, and then that boy dares to try to come home, there was actually a ceremony invoked to indicate to that kid he is cut off from his family and his village.

So for several days, this is such a weighty deal. The father keeps wondering while he is liquidating his assets, *Will my boy come to his senses? Will he change his mind? Will I get him back?* But he won't. The day cannot come soon enough for this boy. When that cashier's check is ready, he walks out of that gate. He shakes the dust of that little town off of his feet, and he cannot leave fast enough. He never looks back. He goes to a distant country. Everything that looks good, that looks shiny and bright and self-indulgent and desirable and pleasurable and satisfying is his...until the money runs out as it always does at death if not before.

Then a famine hits. Not just a famine. Jesus says, "A great famine." There is a little story behind this. Most of us have no idea. You know, you think about it. In that day, when a great famine struck, there was no outside communication, no World Vision, no telethons, no way for a world to know what's going on there and no transportation system if they did. No hope. So a great famine meant (and there are accounts of this kind of thing in the ancient world) murder, thievery, bodies left outside to rot in the street, children being sold into slavery, cannibalism. Jesus' listeners knew of such things.

The point behind this is even when this is going on, that boy does not want to go home. Does not do it until he is at the brink of death. Why not? Because he knows what's waiting for him if he does. When a Jewish boy squandered his inheritance among the Gentiles, if he dared to try to return home, the entire community would gather upon his return. As a symbol of how destructive he had been, how he had broken his relationship with that community, broken his family, broken his father, it was a very visual culture, very dramatic gesture. You think about this. The entire community would gather together. When that boy tried to come home, they would take a pot as a symbol of his life. They would break it before him.

This is a way of saying, "This is the brokenness that you have caused in our community. You have broken everything that is good. You have broken trust. You have broken community. Worse, you have broken the heart of your father. Your damage is beyond repair. So let this be a symbol of your brokenness. Let these be the broken pieces of your broken life. You are not whole. You are not welcome. You are not family. You are cut off." In fact, they called this ceremony the *kezazah*, which is Hebrew for *the cutting off*. Can we all say that word together? Kezazah. You are kezazah. Some of us have felt this kind of brokenness.

Well, the boy knows what's waiting for him if he tries to come home. That's why he stays away even when there is so much pain, even when there is not just a famine...a *great* famine. But finally he says to himself, *Even this is better than dying*. So he decides to return. He makes up a little speech. He sees the village. He braces himself. He knows what's coming. But there is one thing he had not counted on. At the gate in his home stands an old, heartbroken man. He is looking over the horizon as he does every day, hoping against hope. On this day he sees way far away.

You know, the way somebody walks is a really distinct thing. Do you ever notice that? If you know somebody really well, even from behind you can tell them just by their gait. This old man saw that body

take its very first step. He knows that walk. He knows that boy. Jesus says, "*While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son...*" Now when Jesus tells this part of the story to that group of people listening to Him, to those sinners there, some of them start to cry because He is saying something wonderful about God.

The father ran. Luke chooses a technical term to describe what the father did. It was normally reserved for athletic contests. Literally the idea would be the father *raced*. The father sprinted. Now in the Middle East, the patriarch of a family, a man of great dignity and great authority, a man dressed in elaborate, ornate robes, always walks in a slow, dignified fashion. Never runs. I tried to think of a modern example of this. Anybody here remember an old movie star named John Wayne? John Wayne, among other things, was famous for his walk. You can actually Google the John Wayne walk. When he was first in movies, he did not like the way he looked, so he practiced for years his walk in front of a mirror to just walk like an unthreatened, really cool, really tough guy.

I actually tried to imitate his walk so I could show it to you, but I did not look cool...so I'm not going to do it. John Wayne didn't run. Strong, in control men don't run. For this father to run would mean he would have to gather up the edges of his robe so he didn't trip over them if he was really going to run, let alone sprint. That would mean he would be displaying, showing his legs, his naked legs in public. That was not done. That was shameful. That was humiliating. A little boy might do that. A slave on the bottom rung might do that. No father would run. This father runs.

Why? He can't stop thinking about his broken boy. *If the village gets to my boy first, he thinks, it will mean kezazah. It will mean brokenness. It will mean shame. It will mean humiliation, and that might do him in. That might crush his heart. That might crush his spirit. I might lose him forever. I can't let that happen. I have to get to him before anyone else does. I have to be the first one to my boy.* That father picks up his robes, and he starts running. People listening to Jesus' story, you know. That father, filled with compassion, takes on the humiliation that should by all rights have fallen on that prodigal boy. Lets it all fall on himself.

All the twists of this remarkable story that has amazed the human race for 2,000 years, this is the one that's most unexpected. The people listening to Jesus. This father does what no father would do. This father runs because that father never stopped loving that boy, no matter how far that boy went from home. That boy never stopped needing his father, no matter how far he ran away. See, this is not the parable of the prodigal son. This is not the parable of the resentful older brother. This is the parable of the father who runs. It's the story of the running father.

God is so filled with compassion for you whatever distant country you have been in that when you take one step toward Him, He picks up His robes. He bares His legs. He humiliates Himself. He comes sprinting to you. See this is what He was doing in Jesus. Jesus is God running to His rebellious child, to me and you.

The father gets to his boy, and the boy starts into his speech about he is going to try the earning plan. He will try to earn his way back into the family. His father just shuts him up, throws his arms around his boy, embraces him, kisses him over and over and says, "Bring out my best robe and my most expensive ring and my finest shoes. Kill the fatted calf. There will be no kezazah. Brokenness does not get the last word. Not for my boy. There will be music, and there will be dancing, and there will be feasting. There will be a party because my son was lost and now he is found. My son was dead, and now he is alive."

You know, a lot of times when we gather, we talk about different aspects of Scripture, how to understand God or life or faith. This is as simple a message as I know how to make it. This is just about coming home. Will you come home? Maybe you have been in a really far country and made really bad choices. You have been selfish. You have slept around. You have cheated or stolen. Maybe you've committed crimes. Been through an ugly divorce, or more than one. Ripped off innocent people. Been involved in a lifestyle that you think would make everybody in this room blush. You can come home.

You don't have to. You can choose to stay in a far country. Sometimes people go to church sometimes for years, but they're involved in a secret life, a hidden life, that's just crushing others, just killing them. They get just trapped in it, and they want people to keep thinking well about them, so nobody knows. You don't have to. You can come home. Maybe you're kind of like that older brother, and on the outside, things look okay. But the truth is, in your heart, there is just all this anger, pride, resentment, and coldness toward God. You can come home.

So often people think they're stuck with the earning plan. They think, *I have to clean my act up first. I have to impress God with some good intentions or good works or good deeds or some kind of track record.* No. You just come home by the grace of the Father because He is the God who runs. Jesus died in our place, paid for our sin. Nobody earns their way home. You just come.

Philip Yancey wrote a book called *What's So Amazing About Grace?* In a chapter called "The Lovesick Father," he retells this story in a way that just wrecked me the first time I read it, so I thought I would adapt it for us today.

A young girl grows up on a soybean farm outside Decatur, Illinois. Her parents do not much care for the music she listens to or the clothes she wears or her nose ring. She does not much care for their values or their church. They have another argument. She locks herself in her room. When her dad knocks on the door, she screams, "I hate you!" She decides to run away. She decides to run away to the most rebellious, permissive, non-family value state in the Union. Want to guess which one that is? California. She decides to run to the most rebellious, permissive, non-family value city in that state. Want to guess which one? San Francisco. Somebody at 8 a.m. said, "Bakersfield" I think, but it's not. It's San Francisco.

When she gets there, she is much lonelier than she had anticipated, but she soon meets a man who drives the biggest car she has ever seen. He gives her a ride. He buys her lunch. He shows her the city. He gives her some pills that make her feel better than she has ever felt, and she wanted to feel good really bad. She realizes how much life and fun her parents have been robbing her of. This good life goes on for a month, two months, a year. The man with the big car (she calls him "Boss") teaches her a few things about what men like. It's a side of life that she never knew in Decatur, Illinois. The parties and the penthouses and the gifts and the glamour are like being in another world for her.

After a year, the first sallow signs of illness appear. It amazes her how quickly the boss turns mean. Before she knows it, he turns her out on the street. No money; no clothes; no car; no parties. She is alone. She uses what she knows on the streets to get whatever money she can, but she looks gaunt and thin. The men she is with now are no longer wealthy and generous, and sometimes they're dangerous and cruel. All her money goes to support her habit. She eats whatever she can find. She sleeps on a metal grate or a park bench.

One night as she lies awake listening for footsteps, all of a sudden everything around her looks different. She no longer feels like a woman of the world. She is a little girl, lost in a cold and frightening city. Her

pockets are empty. Her clothes are rags. Her stomach is hungry. She needs a fix. Her eyes are filled with tears. Then her mind flashes on a single image...her home in Decatur, Illinois, when summer comes, and the fields are so green you can hardly take all that life in. "Oh God, why did I leave? My dog at home eats better than I do now." She is sobbing, and she knows that more than ever she has wanted anything in her life, she wants to go home.

Three straight calls. Three straight connections with the answering machine. Twice she hangs up without leaving a message. The third time she says, "Dad, mom, it's me. I was wondering about coming home. I'm going to be on a bus. It will pass through sometime around midnight on Tuesday. If you're not there, I'll just keep on going to New York. Just wanted you to know."

The whole time on the bus, she can't turn off the questions. She wonders if they even got the message. She wishes she'd given them more warning. She wonders if they've given her up for dead. She keeps thinking about what she is going to say to her father. She keeps rehearsing this little speech in her mind. "Dad, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I know it was my fault, not yours. Can you forgive me?" She hasn't apologized for anything for years.

The bus pulls into the station, and the driver says, "Fifteen minutes, folks. That's all the time we have." Fifteen minutes to decide her life. She looks in her little compact mirror, tries to brush her hair and get the lipstick marks off her teeth. She sees the needle marks in her arms and wonders if her parents will notice...if they're there. She walks into that bus terminal at one o'clock in the morning in Decatur, Illinois. She has imagined a thousand different scenes in her mind, but not one of them prepares her for what she sees because there inside those concrete walls around those plastic chairs, in that bus terminal in Decatur, Illinois, stands a group of 40 brothers and sisters and aunts and uncles and cousins and grandparents and one dog.

They're all wearing goofy party hats and blowing kazoos and cheering for her as if she were a hero coming home from a war. There is a giant hand-painted sign saying, "Welcome home" taped all the way across the back wall. Standing in front of that crowd with a tear-stained face and a trembling smile is the father whom she told she hated the last time she saw him. She can't bring herself to look him in the face as she starts her little speech. "Dad, I'm so sorry. It's my fault."

He puts his hands on her face, and he raises her eyes up to him. He begins to laugh and cry so hard his whole body shakes. "I know," he says. What he used to say to her when she would cry when she was a tiny little baby, "I know, I know, I know. No need for another word. You'll miss the party. We have to have a party." He takes that body in his arms and brings her home.

So Jesus tells this story, and then He says, "Now if you start with that father, and then you think of One a hundred times better, a thousand times wiser, a million times more loving, then you start to get some tiny little echo of what a good God God is and how much He loves you." That's the Father who says, "Come on home." You can do that right now today. Maybe you're like that younger brother, and you have made choices that are so messed up, goofed up, you're so ashamed or guilt-ridden or regretful. You can come home.

Maybe you're like the older brother, and you've been kind of respectful and respectable. People think pretty well of you. But you're still outside this gate. You're still not at home with the Father, and you know it, and it eats you up sometimes inside. You can come home. A good way to start is the way this boy started. Just to say, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against You. I'm so tired of carrying around

my shame. I'm so tired of trying to pretend to everybody that it's okay. Will You forgive me through Jesus? Will You wash away my sin and heal my brokenness, make me Your son or your daughter?"

Do you know even human fathers want their children to know they're loved? When mine were tiny, most nights when I was tucking them in bed, about the last thing I would say is, "You know, I don't love you this much. I don't love you this much. I don't love you this much. I love you *this* much." You always wonder with little kids what sinks in.

When one of them was maybe five years old, we were washing the car. When I wasn't looking, she pulled everything out of the trunk. We had no money in those days. She pulled everything out of the trunk, laid it on the ground, and was spraying it with the hose, including the new dress I had bought her mom for her birthday, including a tennis racket of mine that had gut strings that cannot get wet. She had never seen me that mad. She looked at me and said, "Daddy, do you love me *this* much?" I said, "No, I love you *this* much."

See, Jesus is saying in this story, "If you want to know how much the Father loves you, look at Jesus' face. Look at His Cross because out of His love, He became broken." His body was broken on the Cross. In some way that I can never even fathom, He cries out to His Father, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" On the Cross, Jesus becomes kezazah...cut off. All this is done so you can come home. God will forgive your sin, and then there is another promise. Jesus puts it like this. "Anyone who loves Me will obey My teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home in them." That word *home* is such a loaded word. There is nothing that touches the heart like the word *home*.

Yesterday afternoon right here in this room I did a funeral for a man named Bill Anderson. He was 85 years old. Died the day before Easter. Like me, Bill was Swedish. As it happens, we both come from the same hometown. He was born in Rockford, Illinois. So that word *home* would always evoke the same pictures, memories, for us. It was kind of ironic at men's Bible class yesterday morning, one of the guys was wearing a t-shirt with a little saying on the back I had never seen before. It said, "Live in such a way that when you die, the preacher doesn't have to lie at your funeral." Who lives that well?

That hunger for home that we have is not a hunger this earth can fill. It's a hunger for the man I was supposed to be, but I'm not. It's a hunger to be forgiven and to be loved and to have my brokenness be put back together. The hunger for home is really a hunger for God. God says He will make His home in you. Then you will never be alone. Then wherever you go, there goes the home of God. That's His promise. So today is about coming home.

If you would, everybody just pull out... You have this card when you came in. Just pull it out for a moment. There is a little prayer on it. I got this idea and the idea of this gate from a wonderful preacher, Mike Breaux, who will be with us in a few weeks. If you want to come home, if you've never done that... Now maybe you have, and you want to thank God right now. Or maybe there is somebody in your life that's far from God and you want to pray for them. But I'm talking right now to people where it's not clear to you that you have come home to the Father, and you'd like to do that. You can do that today.

This prayer, "Heavenly Father, I confess to You my sin and brokenness. I ask Your forgiveness as a free gift through Jesus Christ. I invite You to make Your home in my heart from this day forward." Because see, you can know everything about being a Christian and Jesus and the Cross. But you can still miss it unless you make a decision, unless you invite Him. "I want to receive Your forgiveness and ask You to be at home in my heart." Then you can write your name on that line and mark today's date down. This can be

your day to come home.

Debbie is going to come out right now and sing a song I love that's really kind of words from the Father inviting sons and daughters to come home. So would you bow your heads for just a moment? Let's pray as she gets ready to sing that. We just take a moment right now and let God speak to you. It's been going on all weekend. It's going on in this room right now. There are men and women in this room. Maybe you've been kind of drifting. Maybe you've been running the opposite direction. But right now, God is tugging at your heart.

You know, when God speaks to our souls, it reaches a depth that nothing else in the world can touch. He wants to do that right now. This can be your moment to come home to Him, to just surrender your life. So would you listen now as the Father speaks to you, and then tell Him what is in your heart.

Before the world began, You were on His mind
And every tear you cry is precious in His eyes
Because of His great love, He gave His only Son
Everything was done so you would come.

Come to the Father though your gift is small
Broken hearts, broken lives, He will take them all
The power of the Word, the power of His blood
Everything was done so you would come.

Come to the Father though your gift is small
Broken hearts, broken lives, He will take them all
The power of the Word, the power of His blood
Everything was done so you would come.
Everything was done so you would come.

Maybe your heart is just so hungry to be loved by God. I can listen to that song about a hundred times. So I'm going to ask Debbie if she would sing that chorus one more time. For whatever reason, if you just need to know that God loves you, will you just open your heart right up to Him and listen to Him? Let these be His words to you.

Come to the Father though your gift is small
Broken hearts, broken lives, He will take them all
The power of the Word, the power of the His blood
Everything was done so you would come.
Everything, everything was done so you would come.

So see everything we're about as a church, all the stuff we do, all the classes and services and so, is just so sin-wrecked men and women could come to Jesus, find out they have a hope. There is a God who loves them, and He is in the business of forgiving sins. He will take the broken shards of your life, and He'll bring healing. Way beyond this church, everything that has been done in God's redemptive history, the coming of His Son to earth and His dying on a Cross was all done so you can come home. This is why we're here. So if you never did it before, I hope this is your day to come home to God. You hang on to this card.

Here is how we're going to end. We'll kind of do it differently. I'll say the benediction in a moment, and then I'll ask everybody who is leaving to just kind of leave quietly. But if it would be helpful to you to just kind of seal this deal, you know, so that... You want like a physical expression, "God, I'm coming home. I am not... I'm through waffling on this. I'm through going... I don't want to be vague on this. I'm coming home." Then I'm going to stick around here, and Scotty is going to be around also. If you'd like to with one of us, you just walk through this gate as a way of saying, "There is a Father on the other side with arms wide open. You come home." Then we'll say a prayer together. Just kind of seal the deal.

So would you all stand now? You know, through the weekend it's kind of an interesting part of it. Some people would just go over and pick up a shard and take it with them as a way of kind of saying, you know, "God is in the business of healing broken lives." So if you want to do that, you know, just grab one of these. Brokenness doesn't get the last word. Jesus gets the last word. So now to all the younger and older sons and daughters, whoever you are, wherever you have been, whatever you have done, may you know the grace of Jesus Christ. May you live at home with the Father. Amen.