

Russell Kelfer

No More Worthy

#1362-B

Series: The Parables of Scripture

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INTO HIS LIKENESS RADIO

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Jesus had an incredible way of taking life's real problems and turning them into a springboard for teaching spiritual truth. He would walk into your life and mine, and before we knew it, He had videotaped with the close-up lens of Scripture, a heart issue just exactly like the ones we deal with every day.

As He played the tape back in slow motion on the screen of eternity, however, it usually took the form of a parable, and it usually had sub-titles. Those sub-titles were in a language not everyone could read. Ah, but those who had eyes to see, could read them ever so clearly. And what they said was more than a description of the event and the people involved; the words were encompassed by grace-covered daggers, two-edged swords which penetrated the very hearts of those who listened.

Always, there were principles surfacing that could be applied to the everyday decisions you and I make; but more than that, there were also deep spiritual truths that could only be communicated to the human heart by word pictures. So the Master painted with a verbal paintbrush three-dimensional illustrations which, when developed, surfaced as portraits of the kingdom of God.

What was this kingdom all about? What was it to be like? How would it come into being? Who would be the main characters? What was God's plan of redemption? More important, *What kind of God is this we have given our hearts to?* And perhaps the crowning truth that served as the signature to every portrait, *What is this thing called grace, anyway?*

Again and again for these past dozen or so lessons, we have seen both the principles and the portrait emerge from the pages of God's word, and we have seen that through reading what seemed like children's stories, we have been convicted, convinced and

Note: Russell wrote each of these lessons in a manner that would enable him to clearly communicate them to his weekly class. The grammar or punctuation you encounter may not be technically perfect, but you will certainly "hear" his unique gift for making the message applicable to the common man in everyday situations.

It's been said of him that he was really a writer who read his stuff. And that's a very accurate statement!

May you be richly blessed as you "hear" as you read.

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corrected in our spiritual walk. Today's study is another case in point. It is one of the most familiar of all the parables, yet one of the most heart-shattering as well. Let's read the parable first; then, let's ask God to "open our eyes that we might behold wondrous things out of His Word".

When last we looked together into God's precious pool of parables, we witnessed the Master having dinner at the home of one of those who sought to destroy Him. He was, if you will, surrounded by spies. To them, He was the enemy. To some, perhaps, He was only a nuisance, a curiosity of sorts. To others He represented what could develop into a religious insurrection, and so they saw a need to keep a close eye on this golden-tongued carpenter.

To still others, however, this one who spoke with such authority represented everything they were afraid of, and their one desire at this point was to entrap Him and in some way both discredit Him with the masses and set in motion a process that would allow them to put Him away. His gentle, but intensely practical approach to knowing the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was ripping at the heart of the super-sanctimonious super-structure they had built out of God's precious law. They had taken what God had said, and by raising to a level of equality *their interpretation of that law*, they had succeeded in wrapping a mantle of legalism around the Scriptures that had literally entangled the people until they no longer saw the truth or knew personally the God of the truth.

Then Jesus came. And from those penetrating eyes and that gentle spirit came such phrases as, "Ye have heard that it hath been said of old time...thou shalt not...*but I say unto you.*" Now the law, their schoolmaster to bring them to Christ, reached all the way into the human heart. Adultery became not just an act, but a heart attitude that led up to an act. Murder became not simply something you did to take a life, but an attitude of hatred that could lead up to taking a life. And all of the artificial structures that had been laid in place by man were being dismantled by this Man from Galilee. The authorities wanted Him out of the way, and the sooner the better.

Jesus, however, was not simply attacking the religious status quo. He was introducing something into human thinking called grace. And He was demonstrating something they had

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long known of, but few had experientially understood, something called mercy. It was those two incredibly wonderful open doors into the heart of God that Jesus was continuing to address. You guessed it. He spoke to them again in a parable.

Our Saviour had just told them a story about a shepherd who loved his sheep so much that he willingly left ninety-nine of them to go and rescue one lonely sheep who had become lost and entangled. He followed that with a tale about a woman who lost a coin in the straw floor of her little house and virtually spent the day finding it. He then transported His somewhat nervous hearers into the courts of heaven to witness verbally an angelic choir having a praise-gathering over the conversion of one solitary life; indicating that God placed the same kind of value on one life as that shepherd did over one sheep.

Without so much as a pause Jesus continued, and with bold brush strokes He added the depth of color to the painting He had begun to etch before these Pharisaical eyes. We continue then, where we left off in our last lesson in Luke 15:

Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth.

And he said, A certain man had two sons:

And the younger of them said to *his* father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth *to me*. And he divided unto them *his* living.

And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living.

And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want.

And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine.

And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him.

And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!

I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee,

And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants.

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

And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.

But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put *it* on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on *his* feet:

And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill *it*; and let us eat, and be merry:

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

Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard musick and dancing.

And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant.

And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound.

And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and intreated him.

And he answering said to *his* father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends:

But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf.

And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine.

It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.
(Luke 15:10-32)

The story is oh, so familiar, and the danger of familiarity is the absence of attentiveness. What we have often heard, we tend to think we have completely heard, and so we fail on occasion to dig for deeper treasure, when our previous knowledge is in reality only the spade with which we are to explore.

That is why we must ask God *every time we open His word*, to

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open our eyes to new truth. Chances are you have plumbed the depths of this parable many times before, as have I. Let's neither of us assume that God does not have some new truth or some deeper level of application for us. Let us rather expectantly look to God's Spirit to pour into our hearts a measure of understanding that will make the realities of God's love more personal to us than ever before. He loves for us to ask. He often waits for us to ask. How often we have not because we ask not.

Dear God,

Speak to us this moment, we pray, through this well-known, but wonderful portrait of your capacity to forgive. Show us wonderful things out of your word, we pray, in Jesus' name.

Amen

Jesus is continuing to explore the gospel of lost and found. From a sheep to a coin to a son went the analogy, and now the Master had passed, through the hallway of word pictures, into the doorway of the human heart. Many of these people understood from experience what it means to have a child break your heart. Many of them, *yea, and many of us*, know how difficult it is to forgive one who has simply not lived up to your expectations, even more one who has taken from you and given nothing back. And how many of them, like us, knew from real life how jealousy could rear its ugly head and take a beautiful moment and erase its beauty with a discontented heart.

So now the Master has entered the village of experience and, like us, his audience must have become at least a tad edgy as the story He was weaving began to touch too close to home. There are so many ways to approach this deeply-moving story about a runaway who came to the end of himself, only to come to the heart of his father. Let's begin by simply extracting some key phrases that the Holy Spirit has imbedded in the story, and let us ask God to draw from those phrases rich snapshots of His own dear heart, snapshots we can overlay on His plan of redemption causing us to fall to our knees afresh in gratitude and in joy.

Phrase #1 "Father, give me mine!" (verse 12)

The story is not at all unfamiliar. There are two sons in the same family: one is the pride and joy of mom and dad, does the chores, attends the right schools, loves the youth program at

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church. The other is a time-bomb just waiting to explode, always pushing the envelope as far as he can, trying to explore the world of adulthood long before he is mature enough to understand the responsibilities that accompany adulthood.

This #2 son looks around one day and decides that to wait for dear old dad to die is a waste. Pop could live to a ripe old age and by then son will have spent all those years struggling. “I know”, he surmises, “I’ll ask for my inheritance early, and make my fortune while I can still enjoy it.” He approaches Dad. “Father,” he begins, (they call you Father when they want something), “give me the portion of goods that falleth to me” (give me my inheritance now). Dad reluctantly agrees, as dads sometimes do when the boys get older, and Son #2 (we’ll call him Scooter because he wants to get his money and scoot) gets in his new Corvette, which he proudly paid cash for with his inheritance, and rides off into the distance to live like the king he thinks he is.

“Gimme mine,” the cry of the 90’s is not a new cry. It whines, “God owes me pleasant surroundings. The world owes me a living. My parents owe me a living. The government owes me a living. The school owes me good grades. Society owes me a fair shake. I don’t have to earn it. I don’t have to deserve it. I only have to grab it and run, and if I don’t get it, I’ll sue.” “Father, give me mine,” Scooter cried. And off he rode into the sunset. He may have been headed for Hollywood or Las Vegas, we don’t know. We do know he was headed for trouble. What was his problem? It was the same problem Eve had. He did not want to rest under authority. He thought God or somebody was hiding something from him. So he went off to find it. And find it he did.

Phrase #2-“He wasted his substance” (verses 13-15)

Out from under authority at last, Scooter moved on to the world he just knew awaited him beyond the borders of constraint at dear old dad’s. He applied for and easily received a new Visa Card and began to spend money as though there would always be more. “*He wasted his substance in riotous living.*” He thought, “There’s no tomorrow.”

But there was a tomorrow. “*And when he had spent all*” the Scripture says, “*there arose a mighty famine*”. Just about the time Scooter had maxed out his credit card, the stock market fell; the farmers were going bankrupt from a drought, and everyone who hadn’t prepared for a rainy day, began to scurry for cover.

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Scooter, it seems, had no place to go. *“He began to be in want.”* He got hungry. His expensive clothes weren’t washable and he couldn’t afford the dry cleaner. He didn’t have any food, and the restaurant on the corner wouldn’t take his credit card any more. They confiscated it and cut it up. Scooter was in big trouble, so he did something he never thought he’d have to do. He looked for a job, and all he could find paid minimum wage, feeding hogs for a pig farmer out in the sticks. Uh-oh. It’s payback time. He was so hungry, even the slop he fed the pigs looked good. His day of reckoning had come.

Phrase #3 - “When he came to himself” (verse 17)

Verse 17 is a pivotal verse. It begins, *“And when he came to himself”*. It could be literally rendered, “when he came to the end of himself”. One morning, he woke up, smelled the stench of the trough, looked in the mirror at the mess he had made of his life, and apparently began to weep. I believe what happened is that he awakened to the reality that he could no longer blame society, his parents, or God for the mess he was in. The mirror spoke back to him that morning and said, “Repeat after me: I am responsible for myself. I took the money. I spent the money. I wasted the money. I am a fool.” I think on that day, the scales of self-righteousness fell from his eyes and he stopped shifting the blame or demanding of society what he thought he had coming.

He got what he had coming, all right, and he admitted it. This was the first stage of repentance. He stopped. He realized he did not have all the answers. He turned around and his heart longed for his father’s house.

Phrase #4 - “I have sinned against heaven” (verse 18)

Real repentance, however, goes far beyond feeling sorry for the mess you’ve made. Real repentance stretches to heaven, and sees your sins as violations of the character of a holy God. And so, in verse 18, we read, “I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, *‘Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee’*.”

“I have sinned against God.” Why are those words so hard to say? Why is it we can admit wounding others before we can admit we have broken the heart of God? For this young man to exhibit true repentance, he had to 1) come to the end of himself, 2) recognize that he had sinned against God, and 3) turn around and run home to the Father. As to what kind of response he

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would receive on his return, that comes a verse or two later. The turning point of the story is in verse 18. But still he has not spoken to his father. He has not yet uttered those words that express the grief of his heart; but he is rehearsing them, for he is about to go home at last.

Phrase #5 - "I am no more worthy to be called your son"
(verse 19-21)

"No more worthy". Those are the words that must flow from the heart of fallen man before he can understand grace. The son did not say, "Dad, I've been thinking about it, and I know you probably need me to run the family farm. I messed up, and now I'm coming home to help you out. We'll be a team. Your son has come home. Let's have a party." No, beloved, this young man was not going home to be a better son. *He was going home to be a servant.* He was no more worthy to be a son, *and he knew it.* Such is the mark of true repentance, and such is the beginning of real life. "*No more worthy.*" What a verse to memorize. "*Make me as one of thy hired servants.*" Now, he was ready to go home. Does not Hebrews 5:8 echo in your mind?

Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the
things which he suffered; (Hebrews 5:8)

This son, too, was learning obedience by the things which he suffered. He, like our Jesus, was laying aside his credentials as a son in order to show us by example that real sonship begins with servanthood. And so began the long trek home.

Phrase #6 - "Bring forth the best" (verses 22,23)

Can you not imagine what must have gone on in Scooter's mind as he walked those miles back to what was once his home? What will Dad do? Will he so much as acknowledge me? Will he have me banished from the homestead forever? Will he at least allow me to join the other servants and feed me as he feeds them?

You can almost picture the sun setting one evening at the edge of the family property. The father was out in the fields, overseeing the workers. Suddenly, one of the servants ran to his master and shouted, "Master, your son has come home! Your son has come home!"

Off in the distance, the father could see, like a tiny speck on the horizon, the figure of a young man. It did not look like his

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son. He was treacherously thin, weatherbeaten, and weak. You almost wondered if he wouldn't collapse before he made it to where they were. His clothes were tattered. Could it be his long lost son?

Suddenly, something in the old man's heart began to tell him that this was, indeed, his son. A song began to rise in his heart. He dropped his staff, and began to run as fast as he could towards the staggering shadow he saw in the distance. Dad was no youngster, but somehow his legs supernaturally carried him with the speed of an olympic track star. Nothing could stop him now. His son was coming home. "When he was yet a great way off," the Scripture says, *"his father saw him, had compassion on him, ran, fell on his neck and kissed him"*.

As the old man raced to embrace his long lost son, the boy began to recite the words that were by now etched in his heart, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son." But before the boy could so much as complete his apology, the father began to shout, *"Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet, and bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry, for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found."*

At this point in the story, Jesus put his parable VCR on pause for a moment, and so will we. By now, the crowd that was gathered around Him must have begun to see emerge a picture of something more than a make-believe tale of an errant son. Suddenly the lost sheep and the lost coin and the lost son were all coming into focus as different shades of the same color, as different expressions of the same truth. Jesus had come almost to the end of the story, and he was back to the lost and found department where he had been twice earlier in the day. This story was a little closer to home, but it was also a great deal more emotional. Losing a sheep or a coin and finding them made intellectual sense to even these pompous Pharisees; but having a son leave, thinking he may be dead somewhere, and seeing him return was a much more personal thing. I believe that is why Jesus told these stories in the order he did.

Few stories in Biblical history have been as oft' repeated as this one. It has become a dramatic reminder of the forgiveness of God, and it has served as a source of comfort to grieving parents

whose children have kicked the traces and gone off into the far countries of life, breaking their parents' hearts.

The prodigal son has an ocean of truth to impart to our hearts, and its message is so multi-faceted, we may miss its impact if we do not view it from more than one perspective. Perhaps we ought to start by just glancing momentarily at what it reveals about the heart of man, then spend the rest of our time looking at what it reveals about the heart of God.

Scoter, the younger son who went astray, is a graphic picture of many things: the deceitful heart of man, the sometimes foolhardy nature of youth, and the blindness of the nation Israel, all rolled into one character. And what we can learn from him may teach us a lot about ourselves.

1- The heart of man wants it "now". The disciples wanted the kingdom now. The scribes and Pharisees tried to apply the truths about heaven to now. They couldn't see the two kingdoms in perspective. Unregenerate man still can't, and many believers struggle long into their walk with God trying to take the promises of heaven, and attempting to appropriate them into the here and now. There are hundreds of promises for life on planet earth: promises of inner peace, joy, faith, the ability to possess and share agape love. But so often, in an effort to gain an audience, man creates a more palatable gospel by taking kingdom promises and implying that some things God promised in heaven can be ours on earth if we just have enough faith. Be careful, the things God withholds on earth are often to give us greater blessings in heaven. Scooter wanted it all now. So often, so do we.

2- The heart of man thinks, "It won't happen to me." Scooter was going to be the one who escaped the droughts of life and the diseases of life. He was going to be the exception to all the rules. He was going to leave the confines of the father's house, the father's wisdom, and the father's provisions, and make it on his own. Sure, a lot of guys lost everything that way. Not Scooter. He would be the exception. Sound familiar?

3- Brothers don't think like fathers do. Don't ever underestimate the depth of sibling rivalries. Like hidden malignancies, they often stay underground until, when given the right set of circumstances, they reveal hearts that are green with envy and black with sin. A brother seldom has a father's heart where his brothers are concerned. Pray often for your children that the

competitions for your affections will not surface into jealousy and scar their abilities to love one another. Spend time watching how they interact as they grow older. Try to surface hidden animosities before they are buried deep within the soul. Spend some time this week doing that, and if you want still another assignment, try to apply that principle from this parable to the body of Christ. More about that at a later time.

The most important aspect of studying any parable, however, is to see etched in the fabric of God's Word, portraits of God. That is the primary purpose of Scripture—to get to know God. Jesus was trying to weave into story format, pictures that help us in our limited capacity to grasp spiritual truth, to see just what this wonderful God we serve is like. For example:

1- Look how God acknowledges the free will of man. This can help you deal with your children, and it will help you see God's hand in things you otherwise would miss. Scooter wanted no part of life in the father's house. He wanted to taste what the world had to offer. The father let him. Is that what he wanted? No. Then, why? He knew that unless this young man came to the end of himself and returned to serve the father willingly, it would never work. So he let him go. He grieved. He wept. He longed for him to return. But he gave him the freedom to choose, and loved him even as he departed.

2- Even as we go our own way, and He allows us the freedom to go beyond the boundaries He draws for us, He only lets Satan go so far. With Job, Satan was allowed to touch anything but his body. When Job still didn't respond, Satan was given more freedom, but not to take his life. Scooter went the limits. He pushed the boundaries to the edge. But when he needed a job, even in the midst of the drought, God saw to it that he had one. He also saw to it that he had one that was so menial and so distasteful that it finally brought him to the end of himself. God may allow that one who belongs to Him to taste of things he shouldn't, but there are outer boundaries He does not let Satan through. Let that be a comfort to you as a parent.

3- God knows how to wait, (even if we don't) Oh, the patience of our Lord. This father had no idea where his son was, or if he would ever return alive. Our father knows. Yet, still he waits. Patiently, He waits. He knows that if He pushes us, we may recoil and run the other way. So, lovingly He brings people into our

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lives and circumstances into our lives that will draw us to see our sinfulness and our need to return to the Father's house. Some of us are so proud. Some of those we love and pray for are so proud, as well. Keep praying. Keep waiting. Keep loving. Ask God for the patience to wait. When you do, remember, He will take you through some things yourself to give you that patience so you will have more understanding. It is "the testing of your faith that produces patience". Remember?

I do not know for sure what God might be saying to you through this parable. I do know that if you asked Him to "open your eyes to behold wondrous things", He has, or He will. You may be a hurting parent or a hurting mate who has seen one you love go off into a far country, wasting their substance in riotous living. They may have taken what was theirs and also part of what was yours, and sped off into the sunset with no promise of return.

No doubt you long for them to return to you. The big thing, remember, *is that they return to Him*. So often our prayers center around our getting back what we lost, instead of that loved one returning to the God who formed him in his mother's womb. You also may be holding feelings of bitterness or anger or revenge inside of you, and that animosity may actually be delaying the process. Don't make them earn their way back. Learn the grace of forgiveness. While they are yet a "great way off" do what the father did. Run to meet them. More than halfway, run to meet them. Kill the fatted calf. The issue isn't how much grief they caused you; it's that this, one of God's children, has gone astray, and has returned.

That may not be the application God has placed on your heart. You may be a believer who once had a precious walk with God. Your every moment was a song of grace. Then something happened. You made some bad choices. Sin came between you and God.

Maybe you kicked the traces, like Scooter did. You went your own way. You did your own thing. You would like to return and have rich fellowship with your God once again, but something inside of you says He'll never take you back; you can never again have that kind of walk with Him. The stench of the life you're living is getting the best of you, though. Dare you return from the far country and race into the Father's arms again?

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Oh, beloved, make haste. The Father waits. He longs to hear you say, "I have sinned against heaven and am no longer worthy to be your child. Make me as one of your servants." Don't wait another minute. Run into His arms today, beloved. He will "bring forth the best" for you. Because you deserve it? No, my child, that's the beauty of grace. Because He loves you. I know. You are "no more worthy". You know it. He knows it. Now you have the basis for real fellowship. Come home today. He's waiting.

Finally, you may be the son who ran from the Father's love before He ever had a chance to share with you His saving grace. You may have spent your life wandering in the far country of this world, knowing somehow that somewhere there is someone who longs to have you come home. There is. His name is Jesus. He paid the price to welcome you into the family of God. He bore your sins on a Roman cross and opened the gates of heaven so you can come home.

All He asks is that you acknowledge your sin and acknowledge that you are "no more worthy to be called a son." You simply want to be a servant of the Most High God. The joy is once you realize you are not worthy to be son, He makes you one. Don't try to grasp it all at once. Just run home today and fall into His waiting arms.

He sees you from a distance. All He is waiting for is for you to begin the journey. The moment He sees you coming towards Him, He will run as fast as He can to meet you. He will take you in His arms, kill the fatted calf, and shout, "This my child was lost, and has been found." You know what else will happen? *Those blessed angels will begin singing once again.*

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NOT WORTHY

Listen to those angels,
What a glorious, grand refrain
The Father's face is glowing,
A sinner's home again

One of life's great prodigals
Who fled the Father's home
Has gone into a country far,
As far as he could roam,

Enjoying sin for a season,
He lived and laughed at God
Until life's fortunes twisted led
And life's dark paths he trod

And he awakened, having gone
As far as he could run,
To cry out, I'm not worthy
To be my father's son

And running fast as he could go
Through valleys, hills, and storms
To seek to be a servant,
Into His Father's arms

Not worthy, Lord, Not worthy
My heart's consumed by sin
And when God hears, "not worthy"
The choir begins again.

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A Challenge to Further Study

1- What do you think is the relationship between Luke 15:10 and the story which follows? Why do you think this parable follows the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin?

2- What other Bible characters can you think of who, in essence, said of the Father, "Give me mine!" Where did this thought originate? Can you find its early beginnings in Scripture?

3- Can you find other Scriptural incidents where it could be said of someone, "they came to the end of themselves"? Who are they?

4- Try to explore the thought "no more worthy" through Scripture. Can you find characters either in the Old Testament or the New Testament who proclaimed such unworthiness? Can you find others who proclaimed their own self-worth? Mark how God responded to each.

A Challenge to Further Application

1- Do you know someone who has wandered off into the far country of life; maybe someone you dearly love? Have you forgiven them for wandering? Do you pray for them daily? If you were to see them on the horizon, attempting to return, *what would be your attitude?* Do you dare ask God to make you more patient as you wait? Is your main prayer that they return to you, or that they return to Him?

2- Was there a time in your life when your heart was at one with God's, but in time you have wandered into the far country of compromise, and there is no longer the joy that once you had? Are you willing to begin the journey home today? Acknowledge that you are "no more worthy" and look to the Father's house. He will run to meet you. He always does.

A Challenge to Scripture Memory

Memorize Luke 15:18-20

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