

Passion 4 People Special Speaker
Brad Butcher
Wasilla Bible Church
July 12, 2009

Ashley Brown: Our guest speaker/preacher for today...Brad Butcher. He was...he spent the past week with us, with the high schoolers, up in Victory (Bible Camp). He spoke to us each evening and one of the mornings, and it was a fun thing having him there at camp. He's a...he is an evangelist with some different organizations that he cooperates with, but primarily he works with Passion 4 People, and he travels all over the world just sharing the gospel with people in a variety of venues—festivals, conferences, those sorts of things, camps. He's married, has a lovely wife, Jen, two daughters, Shania and Amelia, and he has a third on the way. And so he's got this young family, they're up here with him as well as his mother-in-law. But something you won't find on his bio, and something that I learned about him just over the course of the week was...I don't know that I've met too many people who really live out a life of prayer as far as just everyday, every kind of...just through the flow of the day. We'd encountered just everything from a kid getting sick to looking at an issue that came up. And he and his wife and his mother-in-law...all of their natural first response was basically just to pray. And so we'd be sittin' here, they'd find out about a need, and they would turn around, and they would stop whatever they were doing and pray right there; because that was more important, and they felt honestly that that could be of more use than anything else that they could do. And so it wasn't something that they just said, 'Hey, I'll pray for you' and then they never thought about it again. They stopped right there. And I think that that says a lot about the heart of the man who's going to speak. And so, Brad, love to have you come up. Thanks.

Brad Butcher: Wow! I love Alaska! I'm from Oregon, and I grew up in eastern Oregon and did a lot of elk hunting, which...I was a little bit surprised there's not a lot of elk up here. But I saw a moose. I thought, "Ok! Big brother up here." Beautiful, beautiful place, and really enjoying it. I just couldn't imagine coming up here without my wife and my kids, and my mother-in-law came up to help us out, and just have had a fantastic time. So thank you so much, your church has been tremendous in taking care of us and loving on us; and you guys I know are well represented by your staff. From the very start, even Rick...I know Rick's not here any longer, but I knew Rick from Oregon. It's kind of how I got up here. Rick did a good job taking care of us as well. And man, we've just been blessed. It's fun, when you travel a lot and you go different places, and you go to give; you go to hopefully let God use you in some way. And the funny thing is, when you put yourself out and entrust yourself to serve God, He ends up blessing you more than, I think, you end up blessing others. And that's what I found here. So thank you so much.

I got a quick video to just maybe to help you, a little context with who I am in our ministry. And part of the message of the video will be extended through the Word today.

[Text of video] Hi! I'm Brad Butcher. I love where I live! We have one of the greatest countries in the history of the world. We got great houses, sports, TV, movies, we've got some of the best universities, health care...you name it, we've got it. But it doesn't really satisfy. I don't know about you, but I want more.

I love going to church, singing to the Lord, hearing the word of God that nourishes my soul, just interacting with my fellow believers. And the ministry of Passion 4 People is grounded in the local church. All of us are involved with our churches. But goin' to church is the easy part of the Christian life. I believe there's more.

Don't you ever just want to break out of church and be the Church? A true follower of Jesus wants to love Jesus with their whole being, wants to take what He's given us and do somethin' with it. Jesus said "Whatever you do to the least of these, you've done to me." That's what it means to be the church, is to find your role with the oppressed, the people that have never experienced forgiveness, never experienced the love of Jesus in their lives.

I love goin' to the movies, especially action thrillers—two hours of non-stop adrenalin. But what if we could live the adventure of the movies, something greater, something that lasts longer than two hours? That's our heart at Passion 4 People is to help you, give you opportunities.

The vision for Passion 4 People International is to mobilize and power to church to take the good news of Jesus in word and deed to the overlooked and the oppressed worldwide. How do we do it? First, shout! We want to proclaim publically Jesus in places where He's not been heard, where people don't know who He is. That's our ambition. 'You're important! You matter! Your life has purpose! And you are dearly loved! And Jesus Christ actually gave His life to forgive you, to make you one, to make you God's child.' Second, we wanna shape individual believers and churches, collectively, and help them learn how to live 'mission-ly', how to be salt and light for Jesus where they live, work, and play, and be able to share who Jesus is with anyone that might be in their world, and people across the world. And then, finally, we wanna shine the good works that Jesus told us to do in serving our community and meetin' people's needs wherever we find them.

[Woman speaking] There's so many beautiful things and people to see, and somebody needs to build. I'm so blessed that I get to be here; and coming here opens my eyes to all the things I do have to offer, and all the ways that God can use me.

[Brad again] If you'd like to join us in shaping, shouting, shining, to bring the gospel where it's not being brought, join up today.

[Different people speaking] Every once in a while you find men and women of God that are willing to lay it on the line just to see lives change in students. And Brad Butcher's definitely one of those people. We've worked with him in the past, would be willing to work with him again anytime we could because he's one of those guys who are the real deal.

The message I heard a long time ago, about...this is the...I understand it clearly...clearer...and I think it can change my life.

My name is Christian Ossoy, and I'm just here to recommend Passion 4 People ministries. I believe that this ministry is going to be a powerful impact for our future and for our kids and the next generations that are gonna be coming.

We're doing an awesome event tonight with Brad, and I just wanna say the reason I love doing these events is because we get to join together with people who are passionate about seeing people come to Christ.

Brad has got a heart for God. Brad has a heart for the world. He has a heart for the most difficult, unreached, out-of-the-way places. That's what I love about his ministry. That's why it is so strategic. That's why I endorse him without hesitation.

I've been thankful for Brad's work, and the team around the world, training pastors, individuals to be counselors in regards to personal evangelism; and in overall organization. I just couldn't have done it without him.

Brad is a wonderful man, you know...only the language varies. So he just go and talk to them, smiles to them so nicely. They don't...people are becoming very good friends with Brad, you know. Everybody talk to them. 'Please come for the meeting, come for the meeting.' You know people come also.

When we see results the way we have with Passion 4 People, through the work in India and around our community here, to us it's just been a great investment for God's kingdom as we've seen many, many people come to Christ through Passion 4 People.

[End of video]

Ok. So where does this passion for people come from? How many of you, honestly...and I'd be the first to say...would like to have a little more passion for people? Anybody? Ok. Even though our ministry's called Passion 4 People International, it is a battle to keep things in perspective, to see the world through the eyes of our Creator. And what I love about Jesus...many, many things...is the perspective that we get through the life of Christ. I challenge you sometime to just read through the New Testament with kind of the premise of 'How did Jesus see the world? How did Jesus see people?' I love, after reading through the Bible, a number of times...sometimes the Spirit will impress on my heart to look for certain things that God wants to speak to me

about, and hopefully today, as we look into the Word in Luke chapter 15, you will see a glimpse of what I'm talking about, and God will speak to you.

We were at camp this week, and I told the students my favorite message is a message on Jesus Christ...palpable force. And we took a look at Jesus—who He was, what He did—and what a wonderful experience to see God's Spirit reveal Himself to these students. And we had a great response of students just kind of surrendering their lives to the Lord. And after some time with their leaders talkin' about it, there was a spontaneous breakout of worship. I think that's very appropriate. Whenever people got a glimpse of who God is, and of who Christ was, there is almost a universal response. They fall on their face. Interesting. And I hope today as we take a look, maybe a fresh look, at this unstoppable force of Jesus Christ in our lives, that that'll be our response. So let's dive in, and as you join with me...

By the way, this is a painting...in the background...that Rembrandt painted; you can find this in St. Petersburg, Russia. What's cool about this picture is that Rembrandt, many times, put himself in his artwork. Did you know that? Some of you studied art; I took a little art history course when I was in college. That was one of the things they pointed out. But you can see him, barely, faintly...there's a guy standing, looking at the Father and the Son here, and just in the background behind Him. That's Rembrandt. He's kind of observing; he's kind of a spectator to this incredible scene. And today my prayer is that we would move from sometimes the comfortable, the casual, spectator...into the story. That's, I believe, God's intention as we look at His word together. So let's dive into Luke chapter 15.

And the first part, the first few verses, is a little context. And this is what it says. (Oh, I've got the clicker; can only blame myself here. Ok.) Tax collectors and other sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach. This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that He was associating with such despicable people, even eating with them. So the picture here is that Jesus was buddies with these sinners, and they were notorious sinners. They were the well-known cheaters, the corrupt politician-type, these tax collectors in particular. They had sided with the Romans, and any good Jewish person would hate the tax collectors because they stole; they took extra; they collected extra tax. And they were corrupt; they were greedy; they were living high on the hog. Why, their own people, many times, were suffering, who were some being in prison because they couldn't pay their taxes. And these guys really were bad. Sometimes it's easy to look at the people Jesus loved and to think, oh, it must not have been that bad. You know, Jesus hung out with them. No, they were really bad. They were really not the kind of people you wanna hang out with. And the prostitutes and others that Jesus was hanging out...they're not being glamorized because Jesus hung out with them. They were...they were an evil force in society. Prostitutes are an evil force, sometimes destroying marriages and families, and drawing men and women away from their commitments from their family and children. So these are bad people.

Now, we have to be careful, don't we? Reality is, we're gonna find ourselves in the story if we let God reveal some things about ourselves. But Jesus was their friend. He ate with them! Back then, if you ate with someone it was a real sign of "I accept you." If you let someone into your house there were rules of unclean and clean. And if you had, let's say if you were a Jew and you let a Gentile into your home, your home's unclean for a while, and you get separated from the Jewish community and from worship. You get kinda penalized. So they were very careful. They wouldn't do that; they wouldn't meet up in their home; they wouldn't let someone in their home who was gonna bring uncleanness into it. The Gentiles, on the other hand, sometimes the Romans in particular, others...didn't like the Jews, and they considered the Jews unclean. And so there was this battle goin' on, and there were other groups at that time. So when it says 'even eating with them', whoa! How could Jesus even think of eating with these sinners? Doesn't He know they're gonna make Him unclean?

Jesus lived, and saw the people, so differently. Let's take a look why. He tells a story of lost sheep. He says, 'You guys are so upset about this. But wouldn't you chase after a lost sheep if you had a hundred sheep and one strayed? Wouldn't you value that sheep? And wouldn't you go after that sheep, bring it back, and when you'd found it throw a party with your friends and neighbors and celebrate?'

Now in that culture, that made a lot of sense. And sometimes we have to kind of bring it into our culture. Maybe for you...I remember one time in India we had our two laptops stolen. How many of you have a laptop? How many of you have not backed that laptop up? Ok? We had not backed these laptops up. This was before the backup stuff was really easy to do. Seems so complicated sometimes, doesn't it? But we hadn't backed 'em up. We lost 'em. Our driver had actually stolen 'em. Good driver, huh? Fortunately, one of our staffers, Monica...she's one of those really cool, really small women that packs a powerful punch. I mean, you don't wanna get on her bad side. And sure enough, she was after this driver and their company, and just doggin' on them. Next thing you know, the next morning...we were praying a lot, too...the laptops show up. We're like "Yes! Yes!" And we were tellin' everyone,

and we were puttin' it in our little prayer updates. We were like "Can you believe this! Two laptops stolen and they got returned!" And it's just incredible. It was; it was truly a miracle. I was like "Wow! The Lord sure saved us!" You know, and I mean, I could just imagine facing our board of directors. I mean, like, "Yeah, we lost two laptops on this trip" and just having to apologize and live up to that. But God...sees people that way. Incredible value. Leave the ninety-nine to go save the one.

(Somehow I'm hitting the clicks in the wrong direction.) But then there's the lost coin. God sees value in people. The lost coin story—woman loses one of ten coins. She tears the house upside-down. She does a crazy thing because that coin's so valuable. And then when she finds it she throws a party. And then it says, "Even so, the angels in heaven celebrate when one sinner repents and comes back to God."

Sometimes we look at the world and there's so many people suffering, there's so much going on. From our perspective it can be tempting to think that God doesn't really care, but he does. What we don't see is His radical, unstoppable work to reach people. And I've been around the world and I've seen God working. In fact, that's my prayer when I'm speaking to people. I say, "God, would You show them that You are crazy for them? Would You do something to show them that?" I've seen God stop the rain instantly so that they would see His power in Africa, and tens of thousands come because the story goes out that some crazy Christians prayed and the rain stopped immediately.

I've seen God heal a woman of tumors, huge tumor, kind of softball-sized tumor; that she had given up all of her money, back then twelve thousand rupees was a lot of money, borrowed from all her friends and neighbors in order to get it removed because it was killing her. And she thought, 'I'm gonna stop at one more possible place to get healed.' She'd gone to all these temples, given offerings, given lots of money. She finally decided...she saw this banner, it was like "Healing Festival with Jesus", ok? And she comes, and we have a time of healing, prayer; so many people in India don't have access to medical care. And for them their only hope is to be supernaturally healed. And that's big business for the Hindu gods...big business. You can go to a temple and pay money, and they'll say a prayer over you, and guess what? Nothin' happens, 'cause a piece of wood or stone isn't going to do anything for you. But they came to our festival, and I prayed over this woman, and I gotta be honest with you. I'm somewhat of a skeptical when it comes to praying over people, because what if nothing happens? I'm always afraid, like "I don't want 'em to think You didn't have the power, or You didn't want to do it, God". And so I'm always praying. They can't really understand what I'm praying most of the time, 'cause they don't speak English...a lot of the ones that come for prayer. The more educated ones don't usually come for prayer as much. Isn't that interesting? 'Cause they're educated, and they trust science over God, and so they don't come as much. But the ones that are illiterate oftentimes will just be so desperate. They'll grab your hand, put it on their head. "Pray for me! Pray for me!" Just hoping something will change.

And so I'm praying over this woman, and I just...I'm just praying "God, please show her You love her. Show these people You love 'em. Would You heal even just one person?" You know, we explain the whole healing thing. Sometimes God chooses to heal through miracles, through prayer. Sometimes God chooses to heal through medical help at a hospital. Sometimes God knows that your healing, right now, is not the best thing for you for other reasons. But He loves you. And He will answer your prayer in the very most...the greatest way. And so we pray for 'em, and she felt different...instantly! And she goes back to the doctor the next couple days, and he can't believe it. Tumor's gone completely! You can see this tumor, so big, and it's just gone. She's celebrating, she's talking to all the people who work at the factory with her. She goes back that Sunday to the church that we were doing the follow-up with, about ten churches working with. And she shows up at one of those churches that next Sunday, and she's got eighteen family members and coworkers she's brought with her to meet Jesus. And she told the pastor, "I brought all those people because I found that Jesus is the real God, and that He hears our prayers, and that He loves us."

And I talked to the pastor about five years later, just this last year. And I was just catching up. 'How's it goin'?' You try to do some follow-up with people you work with. And I said, "Remember that woman that you told me about, that got saved, got healed, and what happened?" He said, "Oh yeah. You know, she moved to another town, but we hooked her up with one of our sister churches over there, and she's faithfully attending. Her family and others who are still here are still part...they're an amazing part of our congregation. And they really got saved. That's all I can say. They really got saved." Isn't that awesome?

But, you see, God loves sinners. He loves people whether they even know about Him or not, whether they even recognize it. He loves...He's doin' things like that all over the world! I'm just giving you one little, tiny sliver of the love of God. And God was planning to do that. Not only did that group of eighteen and whoever they ended up touching, but I'll tell you what...the other nights of the festival, once the word gets out someone gets healed, we get

scores more people coming. And they wanna hear the message because they've seen that there's power in the God that we're talkin' about. And God does that because He loves them. He loves people you don't...we don't know, we don't even think about. He's thinkin' about 'em.

And this is a picture of that in the Prodigal Son. To illustrate this further, Jesus tells a story of a man who had two sons. The younger son told his father, 'I want my share of the estate now instead of waiting until you die.' So the father agreed to divide his wealth between the sons. Put yourself in the story. You're the father—how do you feel? A son just told you, 'I wish you were dead. But since you're not, would you give me the money now?' Did you hear that? Do you hear that? Do you know there's a lot of people in this world that are saying that to God? 'God, I don't care about You. Just give me what You can give me.' Sometimes we're that way. God is the One that we want stuff from, but we don't really want a relationship with Him. We wanna take what He gives us and then go enjoy it and forget Him. That's a temptation, isn't it? I fall into it. Put yourself into the story...how does that feel to be a father who just loves your children and just cherishes them?

When my girls wanna come to me... My little Amelia, she's one-and-a-half, she'll come up to me and lay her head on my leg while I'm sittin' down or I'm standin' up. I'll tell you what, that feels pretty good. That feels real good. 'Oh yeah, you just lay it right there. Oh, that's so nice.' It really is; it's just wonderful! Because even at that young age she recognizes me. Now sometimes she might get someone she thinks is me...it's kinda funny. But I'll tell you what...she'll just run up and she'll lay her little head on me. Or my daughter Shaynih...when she goes to bed at night she'll say, "Dad, rock me. Rock me." We have a little rocking chair in her room, and I just love to rock her. I'm just like, 'Oh, this is not gonna be that long before she's not gonna want to be rocked, sitting on my lap.' And I'm just gonna enjoy this. And it's wonderful...because she knows me; she wants to be with me. She's not askin' for anything. She just wants to be with me.

But when she does ask for things I love to give it to her as well, 'cause I love her. And that's the picture. Put yourself in the story. How's this father feelin' right now? 'You don't wanna stay here with me? You wanna leave? You don't care about us? You don't care about the family business?' Back then sons were the ones who were gonna carry out the family business. So not only is he rejecting the father, but he's rejecting the family enterprise. He's saying, 'I don't care about you, and I don't care about what you're about. I'm gonna do my own thing.' Plus he took a lot of the resources from the family that could have been used for other things that were more important.

A few days later this young son packed up his belongings, took a trip to a distant land where he wasted all his money on wild living. Ouch! Wow! Put yourself in the shoes of the father—how does that feel? Some of us know how that feels. You've had your kids do that. You've had your kids waste a lot of resources, a lot of their life. Some of you know how that feels because you're the prodigal son. You've done that. Even now some of you are doin' that. Your Father in heaven made you with a purpose, gave you so much, invested in you, gave you a mind that's incredible, gave you resources, gave you talents, gave you all that you have. And you're not lookin' to Him to use 'em. You're lookin' elsewhere. You're thinkin' there's more happiness, more satisfaction doin' 'what I wanna do for my glory', and you're missin' out on the family, on the Father, and on His glory and on building on His kingdom. And you're missin' out. I miss out. I miss out. I've been prayin' lately, "Lord, don't let me waste Your stuff on wild living, on thoughtlessness, on selfishness, on stuff that doesn't really matter for eternity."

At camp we've been talkin' with the students about Revelation. It says there'll come a day when we'll all stand before Christ and give account. And it says the books will be opened, and everything we've done will be laid out, and we're judged according to what we've done. And those who do not know Christ, they will be not only judged... 'Ok, here's what you did for God, here's what you did for yourself,' and they'll have to pay for their sins. Those who are in Christ, who've let God redeem them, they aren't judged by their sins. Their sins are already been punished for, been paid for by the blood of Christ. But they're judged according to what they've done with what God's given 'em. And they're rewarded accordingly.

It's a good thing to consider the end, what will be, what mattered, what we're lookin' for. Why did the son go, leave the father's house and go waste everything in wild living? What was he looking for that the father could not give him? Sometimes we think that the grass is greener on the other side, don't we? It's just...it's our nature. 'Oh man, life must be more exciting when you can do whatever you want.' And God is saying to you and to me, 'No, life is way more exciting when you do what I want, because I created you exactly the way you are. I know the future. I know every day that you will live, laid out before you.' If you wanna look up exactly what I'm talkin' about, look at Psalm 139, one of my favorite scriptures. It says, 'You even lay out the days before any of 'em have come about for me.' That's how intentional you are. You're not an accident. You're not just a matter of a mother and father's choice to have a child. You're God's choice no matter how you came into this world. Amen? And God is excited and thrilled about who He planned you to be, and He doesn't want you to miss out.

And He is the perfect Father. He's not a controlling father that just wants to make you miserable. He's the perfect, loving Father. He said, 'My plan for you...' He says no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind conceived the wonderful things God has in store for those who fear Him. That's in Corinthians. Amazing! Do you believe it?

About that time his money ran out and a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. He began to starve. Interesting circumstances. Let's see, right about the time his money runs out what happens? Famine. God is so gracious. I think of a small reminder—there's no coincidence. No coincidence. God does that for us, doesn't He? He just says, 'Ok, I know what it's going to take to get you to come to your senses.' And that's what happens.

He persuaded a local farmer to hire him to feed his pigs. The boy became so hungry that even the pods he was feedin' the pigs looked good to him. Have you ever seen what pigs eat? And the truth is he's a Jewish boy. This is Jesus tellin' the story. It's a Jewish family. If you know anything about Jewish culture, pigs are not cool. Pigs are an unclean animal. They're the worst. And this would be the most decimating thing he could do as a Jewish boy, would be workin' with pigs. He's got himself so far down...he's not only physically unclean, he's spiritually unclean. He's just broken. He's just broke. He's in the bottom. And no one gave him anything.

That's the way the world works, isn't it? It promises all these things. All these ads, all that stuff we watch on TV, all the stuff we see in the world is promising you happiness. It's promising you if you have these clothes, if you eat this food, if you go to these vacation spots, if you do these things you'll really be happy. I love...I don't love, but I think it's interesting to watch a beer commercial. Most of the time it's not about beer, is it? It's about this attractive woman, about this attractive way that you can see yourself in the commercial. 'If you drink beer you'll be like this.' But you know what? It's not going to give you anything. It's going to leave you high and dry. It's just going to rob you.

He finally came to his senses. He said to himself, "*At home even the hired men have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger. I will go home to my father and say, 'Father, I've sinned against both heaven and you. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. Please take me on as a hired man.'*" He came to his senses. It's a beautiful picture, because when we come to our senses the only thing we want is to be a servant of God, come home, to say, 'God, you are God, the only God, the creator of everything! You are awesome, and the very best place for me is right in the center of Your will, just all of me being Yours. I don't deserve anything.' Do you deserve anything? Reality is we've all strayed from God, we've all messed up, we've all failed His perfect standard. And I'm talkin' to both those of you who've trusted Christ and those of you who haven't.

It's a good reminder, because the other alternative is for us to look at God and be kind of senseless and think that God owes us something. 'Cause that's easy to happen as a Christian, especially if you grew up in the church. How many of you have grown up goin' to church? Ok. A lot of us. And sometimes we get kind of turned around, thinkin' 'I didn't really need God that much. I'm a pretty good person.' But we all needed Christ to be crucified. One sin is enough. And it's a good reminder...where would you be heading without Christ's sacrifice for you? In fact, those of us grown up in the church, we've been saved from even more because God changed our path, kept us from doin' a lot of thing. I grew up as a pastor's kid and I'm so grateful. I didn't do drugs, I never smoked. I tried smoking long grass one time. Police car drove right behind us when we were tryin' to smoke it. That was the last of that. It was God...no way that was an accident, the timing of it.

God has saved some of us from more than we can even imagine. And it's good to imagine what would my life be like without Jesus Christ. In fact, when you start goin' down that road pretty soon you realize how much you've been saved from, what you've been saved for; pretty soon you find yourself wanting to share your faith! It's like 'Wow! God is so good to me! I gotta give this away! I've gotta join the family business.'

A few days later the son packed his belongings... (I'm sorry guys. I'm really not a professional clicker today, and I'm runnin' out of time. This is not good. So let me wrap it up.) This next part is really critical if you put yourself into the story. He returned home to his father. While he was still a long distance away his father saw him coming. It's as if the father was waiting every day, looking out across the horizon, saying 'Where is he? Is he gonna come home today?' The father never stopped loving him, no matter what he did. And he knew...he knew 'he was just wasting all the fortune I worked hard for, all the stuff I've given him. But I love him still. And nothing he can do can stop me from loving him.' And then he illustrates it. Filled with love he saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion he ran to his son. He embraced him; he kissed him. His son said to him, "*Father, I've sinned against both heaven and you. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son.*" And he's crying. You can see the picture. Are you in the story? Are you the father? Are you the son?

Put yourself in the son's shoes now. And your father is running to you, which is very undignified in that time; the father should not run to the boy. But he runs to him, and he's so excited to see him. And the son's been hanging out with pigs; he smells; only the clothes on his back. And the father is in his elegant robes, and you just see him give him that bear hug and just say, 'Oh, I'm just so glad to have you back!' And this son's doing this 'Father, I'm so sorry! I'm so sorry!' And the father almost, it's as if he doesn't even care. He doesn't let him finish. "*I'm not worthy to be called your son!*" But the father said to his servants, 'Quick, bring the finest robes in the house! Put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet.' He said, 'This is awesome! You're back! I love you. I love you.'

My friends, remember who's telling the story. It's Jesus. This is a short time before the cross, and Jesus is telling this story, giving us a picture of what he's here for. He's the Father running to us, coming from heaven to earth, the most crazy, undignified thing we can imagine—God coming to earth, becoming human, lowering Himself, and saying "I love you. I'm gonna get dirty. I'm gonna pay for all that you've done so that I can bring you home, and I can clean you up, and I can give you a whole new life, a whole new start."

This son, let me tell you, has he changed? This response he gets from his father...do you think that had an impact on him? When he understands what he deserves? 'Cause he deserves to be put in prison. He deserves to be disowned, disallowed. The father shoulda run to the border and said, 'Don't cross here or I'll shoot ya, because you have shamed our family, you have stolen and wasted all of our money. That's what you deserve. I don't ever wanna see your face again. You're not my son.' Right? But instead the father is just 'insane'. But see, it's just a picture of what Christ has done for us. See, Jesus is tellin' the story. He knows what He's gonna do, so that this is how God sees us. He already knows what He's gonna do. He's like 'This is why I came. This is why I'm hangin' out with these sinner; 'cause I know when I die on the cross this is what's gonna happen to them if they trusted Me. And I just can't wait. I cannot wait. I love you.'

'Kill the calf we've been fattening in the pen! We must celebrate a feast, for this son of mine was dead and is now returned to life; he was lost, but now he's found.' So the party began. And then you know the story. Meanwhile the older brother was workin' in the field. He returned and heard the music and dancing, and he asked one of the servants 'What's going on?' 'Your brother's back; your father's killed the fatted calf and prepared a great feast. We're celebrating because of his safe return.' And the brother's response—the older brother's angry. He wouldn't go in. The father came out and begged him, and said... But he said 'All these years I've worked hard for you, never once refused to do a single thing you told me. And all the time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. Yet this son of yours comes back, squandering your money on prostitutes, and you celebrate by killing the finest calf we have.' And the father says, 'Look, dear son, you and I are very close, and everything I have is yours. I had to celebrate this happy day, for your brother was dead...he's come back to life. He was lost, but now he's found. But now he's found.'

The sad thing about the older brother...he doesn't get it, does he? He's not even tellin' the truth. Has he obeyed his father every day and done everything he's asked? No, none of us have. Right? That's impossible. He's so self-righteous. He thinks he deserves everything. But really, everything he has...guess where it came from? His father. Everything. If you raise kids...I'm raising my girls...I'm just praying, "Lord, help them to have an understanding of how much has been invested in them, and not to feel entitled." There's so much entitlement in our country, especially among young people. But God doesn't owe us anything. Everything we have aside from hell is a gift. It's a gift we don't deserve, through Christ.

Let's just look at your outline real quick without going into real details here, for the sake of time. There's some principles. Number one—he preferred riches over a relationship; two—confused freedom with fulfillment; three—chose pleasure over purpose. That's the wrong way. The way home...recognize your condition. He came to his senses. He realized 'this doesn't really fulfill.' And yet Jesus promises 'I have come to give you life to the fullest.' Full life is only found in Jesus. Come to your senses. Realize your condition. Two—repent fully, vertically with God, horizontally with people. Notice he says, "I have sinned against you and God." Return home—number three. Leave everything except you, receive everything God offers you. What's in your past that you are holdin' on to, that Jesus has already forgiven and already taken care of? What's really holdin' you back from goin' forward with God and trusting His love for you? Some of us...that's the hang-up. That's the hang-up. We're lookin' back. Don't look back. He's already taken care of it. Just look forward. He's got everything you need prepared for you.

The Father's way is undignified love. One—unstoppable pursuit. It doesn't matter what you've done or can do. He's after you. Undeserved and unending right-standing. That ring on the finger means you're a son again. That's authority, the ring of authority. That means you're not a servant. Anyone sees that ring knows you've got authority. You're a son. Unlimited resources—who brought the robe and the sandals, and said, 'Whatever you need, son.'

What's mine is yours.' Unfathomable celebration. We talked about this at camp. Do you know you're celebrated? Don't compare yourself to anyone else. You're just the way God wanted you. He delights in who you are. You are celebrated. Finally, our response. Adoption and adaption... (Oh, sorry.) Rejection and rebellion resulting in unquenchable waste and wrath if we reject the Lord. And two, adoption and adaption resulting in unreal worship and works. That's why it was so cool to me that the students broke out in worship after that night at camp. It was on their own. It wasn't the leaders; it was the students, because they got it. 'Wow! God loves me! God has given me a new start. God has a plan for my life. God is where it's at. I want my life to be totally his.'

I wanna pray with you as we close today.

Lord, I just thank You so much for the chance we've had to share in this story. I pray as we leave here this morning that we wouldn't let this go, Lord, that this image would be imprinted permanently on our mind. And Lord, that we wouldn't be an observer watching Your great love story with others and miss out on Your embrace. Lord, help us to come back and to just find ourselves coming right into Your arms, and coming to our senses and realizing just how much You...just how crazy Your love is for us. And then, Lord, I pray that as we're in Your embrace and we stay there every day, that we stay with You. We don't just ask You for things and head on our way and forget You. But Lord, as You are the One that we know walks with us, the One who's chosen us, the One who has cleansed us and forgiven us, and empowering us, and giving us every resource we need, Lord, help us not to be grumbling and complaining as if we have no Father, as if we're on our own. But Lord, help us to walk in Your embrace, and to do so in such a way that we would be like Jesus, and that we would be hanging out with those who are not yet there, who we see out there around us, looking for all these things, going to the distant land thinking they're going to find fulfillment, and they're not. And we know it because You've taken us back and we know what it's like to waste our life on things that do not fulfill. Even every day You allow us to see that through Your Spirit. And God, we just pray that we would have a heart for them, wanting them to be embraced by You, to feel Your love and to come home, and to be made a child again.

Lord, use this church, use this congregation. And Lord, just as this picture you give us of the son come home, as we put ourselves in that son's shoes recognize he must have lived the rest of his life totally devoted to his father, to his father's work, just wanting to please his father in every way because of the grace extended. Lord, I pray You find us living that same way, and that people would even say, "Why are you so full of grace? Why are so full of love?" And Lord, we would simply say because You have loved us so well, because we didn't deserve anything and You gave us everything through Christ.

Lord, I pray one last prayer, that if there's anyone here who's just an observer, who's not yet received You, would You bring him in today? Would You give him the courage to just cry out to You just like all the rest of us, and know that You hear our prayer and You will instantly save us because of Christ and what He's done on the cross for us. You said if we confess our sins you are faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleans us from all unrighteousness, and whoever calls on the name of the Lord Jesus will be saved. So Lord, I just pray they'll call on you today and receive a new life.

I pray this in Christ's name, Amen.

Thanks, guys. And if you would like to know more about what we are doin' and be a part of it, you go on trips, praying with us, there's a table back there and I'd love to share more with you. Thanks, guys.

Ashley Brown: Thanks. If you would please stand, we're going to close with a song of prayer that we would extend God's grace and let people know of the reality of Christ, and extend that grace of the prodigal son, really, as we go out in every circumstance of life.

[Congregation sings prayer song.]

Thank you very much for coming, and go in grace.