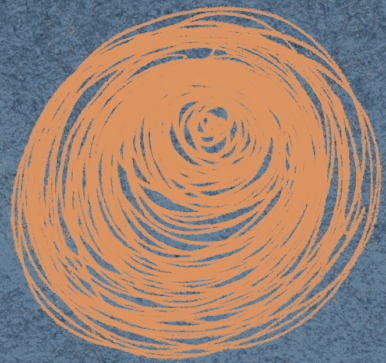


# The Prodigal Son

Discovering the  
Fullness of Life  
in the Love of the Father



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# About the Author



**MATT CARTER** serves as the Pastor of Preaching and Vision at the Austin Stone Community Church in Austin, Texas, which has grown from a core team of 15 to over 8,000 attending each Sunday since he planted it in 2002. Matt has co-authored multiple books including a commentary on the Gospel of John in The Christ Centered Exposition Commentary series. Matt also co-authored a novel of historical fiction, *Steal Away Home*, which tells the real-life story of famed pastor Charles Spurgeon's unlikely friendship with former slave-turned-missionary, Thomas Johnson. Matt holds an M.Div. from Southwestern Seminary and a Doctorate in Expository Preaching from Southeastern Seminary. He and his wife, Jennifer, have been married for over 20 years, and they have three children, John Daniel, Annie, and Samuel.



# Introduction

Being a Christian is hard. There, I said it.

Wait a minute Matt, Jesus said my burden is easy and my yoke is light. And you know what? That's true. When I'm fully submitted to Jesus and walking well with Him, that verse makes all the sense in the world. My problem is that I have a pretty good track record of not consistently walking well with Jesus. Not because of Him, but because of me. Maybe that's not your story, but it's mine. Christianity is hard. Worth it, but hard.

As a pastor for over 20 years, I've been preaching the Bible for a long time—been reading it for even longer. And when it comes to my biblical heroes, the ones that I have found over the years that I love the most, I love not because of the good they've done, but because of how they've failed. Why? Because I can relate.

There's a guy in the Bible I definitely wouldn't call my hero, or really a hero at all, but can certainly relate to. People often refer to him as "the prodigal son." If you grew up in church you know the story, but if you didn't here's the short version. This young man asks his dad for his inheritance before the old man dies. His father grants his wish and the young man takes off to foreign land, then squanders his inheritance and is forced to come home and beg for his father's forgiveness. That's actually not how the story ends, but I don't want to get too far ahead of myself.

When I was younger, I couldn't relate to this guy. But now, years later, unfortunately I can relate to him more than I ever thought possible.

If you're a Christian that has it all figured out, this book is not for you. If you're a Christian that's never really failed, fallen, or struggled, there might be a better use of your time than reading these pages. But if like me you love the Lord, but at times throughout your life you find yourself weary and broken, bruised and battered—maybe even hanging on by a thread—then this book is for you. No matter how weary you are, or how far you've fallen, your Father's love for you is greater than your wildest imagination. I wrote this book partly as therapy for myself and partly as a guide for people like you. And hopefully, it will guide you back into the arms of a loving Dad ready to welcome you home, wipe you clean, and call you His beloved son or daughter.

*Matt*

# How to Use

This Bible study book includes eight weeks of content for group and personal study.

## GROUP SESSIONS

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Regardless of what day of the week your group meets, each session begins with the group session. Each group session uses the following format to facilitate simple yet meaningful interaction among group members and with the truths of God's Word presented in this study.

**START.** This page includes questions to get the conversation started and to introduce the video teaching.

**WATCH.** Here we're provided space to take notes on the video teaching.

**DISCUSS.** This section includes questions and statements that guide students to respond to Matt Carter's video teaching and to explore relevant Bible passages.

## PERSONAL STUDY

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**PERSONAL STUDY.** Each session provides two personal Bible studies. Each personal study works through the Scriptures to deepen your understanding of the week's topic, including questions designed to help you understand the Bible and apply its teaching to your life.

**BIBLE READING PLAN.** Additionally, each week of personal study provides four guided Bible readings that allow you to read related passages from the Scripture and learn to study them on your own. Each reading follows the REAP method, outlined on the next page.



# The REAP Method

Each session features four Bible reading exercises, using the REAP method.

## READ

Read the passages for today's Bible reading. Read the passages with an open heart, asking the Holy Spirit to give you words of encouragement, direction, and correction (2 Tim. 3:16). Underline the verses that stand out to you.

## EXAMINE

Spend some time reflecting and writing about what you've read. Write down one or two of the key verses that stand out as particularly important. Ask yourself these questions and write down your thoughts:

- What is going on in the passage?
- Who is writing and who is he writing to?
- When was the author writing?
- What are the circumstances that the author is addressing?
- Does the writer mention anything that might indicate his purpose or intent?
- How do you think the author wants his audience to respond?

## APPLY

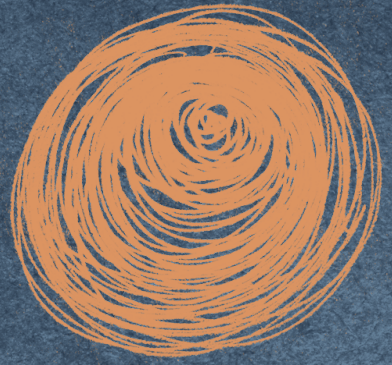
After examining the passage, apply the text to your own life. Ask yourself these questions:

- What is God saying to me through this passage?
- How will I live differently and see myself differently today because of what I read?
- What are the things in my life that need to change in light of this truth?

## PRAY

Pray through the passage and your application, asking God to change your heart and your life based on the time you've spent in His Word.





WEEK 1

# *The Problem*





# START

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*Welcome to Week 1. Use these questions to get the conversation started.*

A parable is a simple story used to make a point. Jesus often used parables to teach His followers what it means to know and follow Him. Over the next eight weeks we're going to examine what many people think is the greatest parable Jesus told: the parable of the prodigal son.

**Name one of your favorite stories. Why is it one of your favorites?**

**What have you learned from this story?**

Stories engage our imagination in a way that other kinds of teaching don't. They guide us to discover things we might not otherwise notice by inviting us to see the world anew through the perspective of its characters. The parable of the prodigal son offers the same opportunity. At first glance, you might be thinking that a nearly 2000-year-old story doesn't sound that exciting, but consider this: The story of the prodigal son has been giving people hope and opening their eyes to the unmatched love of God for nearly 2000 years. Studying this parable together is an invitation to see the world from another perspective, a better perspective than our limited one—the perspective of the Father. As we do so, we will not only discover the hope-filled future the Father has for us but also the transforming power of His love for us.

**Ask someone to read Luke 15:11-24.**

*Pray and ask God to use our time together. After praying, watch the video teaching.*

## WATCH

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*Use this section to take notes as you watch the Week 1 video.*

## DISCUSS

---

*After viewing the video, discuss the following questions with your group.*

What are some examples of ways you or someone you know has tried to find a “better life”? What’s wrong with seeking out such a life outside of our heavenly Father?

Why are we hesitant to follow Jesus? What do we feel as though we are missing out on if we fully commit to Jesus?

Read Matthew 13:44. Why is the reward of following Jesus worth what it might cost us?



Following Jesus will always cost you something. It might cost you popularity, relationships, or “success.” The good news, however, is that the rewards for following Him outweigh the costs. When people encounter the life-giving, soul-changing love of Jesus, they turn their backs on the temptations of the world and they go all-in.

**What keeps us from seeing Jesus as worth losing everything else to pursue? What changes when we finally see Jesus as our greatest treasure?**

**What’s wrong with seeing Jesus as merely a part of our lives instead of our whole life? What do we miss out on when we think this way?**

Reading a story like the prodigal son, it may be tempting to think, “I would never do that.” But at some point, we all doubt the love of our Father. The temptation for the far country exists for all of us. If it doesn’t right now, it will in the future. For some of us the far country comes in the form of attempting to fit Jesus into our already busy schedules and priorities. The problem with such an approach is that it misses Jesus’ inherent value—He is worthy of all that we are and all that we have. This story helps us see that no matter how far we roam, the best life is found in the love of the Father.

**Where do you see yourself in this parable? Why should the parable cultivate sympathy for people who have wandered away from faith in Jesus or never experienced it to begin with?**



# Why Do People Walk Away?

The problem at the heart of this study is the reality that an increasing number of people are coming to the dangerous and false conclusion that life is more fulfilling outside God's love. Why is that? What keeps people from following Jesus? Interestingly, Jesus answered this question with another parable earlier in Luke.

**Read Luke 8:4-15.**

**What are the four types of soil and what do they represent?**

Jesus used parables to teach truth to His followers. Though this story is often called "the parable of the sower," the focus is not really on the sower but on the soil where the seeds fall. Each type of soil received the Word of God, and each responded differently. Looking at each soil helps us identify reasons people walk away.

## No Faith in the First Place

**What kept the seed that fell on the hard ground from taking root? Why should we have compassion toward the people represented here?**

Some walk away from Jesus without ever having faith in the first place. The initial batch of seed fell on the hard dirt along the path, and the birds snatched the seed away before it could take root. This soil represents the people we know who reject God. The devil has blinded them from seeing the goodness of God (See 2 Cor. 4:4.).

**What is wrong with assuming that because someone shows up at church or participates in religious activities, they're committed to Jesus?**

## The Appearance of Faith

No amount of going to church, attending youth group, or even going on mission trips makes someone a Christ follower. Without a genuine faith, people are like the seed on the rocky soil; there is an appearance of growth, but it can't be sustained because they never personally experienced the life-changing salvation of Christ.

**How can you be sure that your faith is your own and not merely motivated by a desire to please your friends or family members?**

## Allure of the World and Shame of Failure

The third soil that Jesus mentioned is filled with thorns that grow and choke faith “with worries and riches and pleasures of this life” (v. 14). The allure of the world was stronger than their faith in Jesus, so they pursued worldly temptations instead of Him.

**In your experience, what are the “thorns” that make people chase experiences and comforts of the world instead of Jesus? When do you feel this temptation yourself?**

Perhaps one of the reasons Christianity is on the decline in the United States is that people simply come to the conclusion that following Christ means missing out on the best life has to offer. With the third soil, Jesus could also be describing those people who allow worry that their past or current sins might keep them from Jesus.

## Lack of Committed Christians

The fourth soil that Jesus described was the one where the Word of God was received with joy and began to produce fruit. This is what it means to follow Jesus—you find joy and contentment in Him and live to tell others about Him.

**How would you describe your relationship with Jesus? Where do you need to grow?**

The fourth soil—the committed Christian—produced an abundance of fruit. Maybe you don’t know a fully committed Christian, but that doesn’t mean you can’t become one. The Bible screams from the rooftops that the greatest and fullest experience of happiness and blessing is found in only one place, and that is in a full-hearted, both feet planted, total life commitment to Jesus.

**End your time today praying that God would help you commit to Him fully. Consider also taking some time to pray for people close to you who either don’t know Jesus or have walked away from Him.**



# The Solution

Many people are asking serious questions about what it means to follow Jesus. They want to know, "If I follow Christ, what will it cost me? Will I miss out on life's best?"

The answer is a resounding "no." The only life worth having is found in knowing God the Father through His Son Jesus Christ. This is the central claim of Christianity. However, we need to realize these questions are not new; people have been asking them for centuries. Today we're going to look at one such question in John's Gospel.

## A Bold Claim

**Read John 6:53-58.**

**Jesus did not literally mean that people should eat His flesh or drink His blood. What did He mean? Why did the crowd find this statement offensive?**

At this point, huge crowds followed Jesus wherever He went. He was working miracles, feeding the hungry, and healing the sick. Jesus paused, looked at the crowd and said that unless the crowd ate his flesh and drank His blood they could not follow Him (v. 53). By "flesh and blood," Jesus was referring to His whole being. Jesus was saying that unless they devoted themselves entirely to Him they could not find life.

**Why is the claim Jesus made still shocking? Why do some find it offensive?**

Jesus' claim that true life can only be found in Him is the most shocking and controversial claim in all the world. And Jesus made this claim repeatedly. It offended people in the first century and it offends people today. The huge crowd following Jesus—drawn in by His teaching and miracles—didn't understand. Many of them turned and walked away. His disciples were standing with their mouths wide open, stunned that the popularity of their leader had just plummeted, but Jesus was unmoved by it.

## A Bold Response

Peter realized life is found in only one place—Jesus.

**Read John 6:66-69.**



### **What does Peter's confession in verse 68 tell us about Jesus? About us?**

All people are hardwired to pursue a life of purpose and meaning because we were all created to relate to God. Jesus made a bold claim when He said that the fullness of life can only be found in following Him completely. In other words, if we are looking for life outside of Jesus we will never find it.

### **Peter asked Jesus, "Lord, to whom shall we go?" Think for a moment about your friends who don't know God. Where do they turn to find life? What are the results?**

We live in a culture where people are desperate for a different way to live. No amount of friends, trophies, awards, money, or social media followers can give us the life we desperately desire. These things may make us feel good for a moment, but they can't ultimately satisfy us.

Those of us who know Jesus have a responsibility to show other people the way to abundant life (John 10:10). How will the people around us see a better way if we aren't willing to show them? How are we going to turn the tide of death and despair in our culture if Christians live no differently?

### **How does the way you live show people what it means to follow Jesus?**

This world desperately needs to be shown a new way. The world needs ordinary people who decide to go all-in when it comes to following Christ. Our culture is desperate for a generation of believers that don't just make Jesus a part of their lives, but passionately put Him first and show this world with their everyday lives that yes, there is a better path—a path of peace and love and joy and purpose.

### **What might you need to let go of to follow Jesus more closely? Is there anything you need to give up?**

### **How could you point a friend to the hope and life that is found in Jesus this week?**

**Pray that God will help you find life in Jesus alone. Use Psalm 16:11 as a guide.**



## Luke 15:11-24

Further familiarize yourself with the story we will be diving into over these next eight weeks together.

---

### Read

Read the passage slowly and carefully with an open heart, asking the Holy Spirit to direct, encourage, and correct you as you read.

---

### Examine

Pick a few verses and look at them more closely to gain a deeper understanding of what the Bible is saying.

---

### Apply

Consider how you will live differently in light of what you read.

- How are you like the younger son?
- Jot down one way you will remind yourself this week of God's love for you.

---

### Pray

Pray through the passage and your application, asking God to change your heart and to change your life based on the time you've spent in His Word.



# Matthew 13:44-46

Jesus told a series of brief parables to explain the true value of the kingdom of heaven. Nothing in life can give us what Christ's kingdom offers.

## Read

Read the passage slowly and carefully with an open heart, asking the Holy Spirit to direct, encourage, and correct you as you read.

## Examine

Pick a few verses and look at them more closely to gain a deeper understanding of what the Bible is saying.

## Apply

Consider how you will live differently in light of what you read.

- Jot down a list of things you treasure or greatly value.
- Circle any of the things on your list that might be hindering you from loving Jesus more.

## Pray

Pray through the passage and your application, asking God to change your heart and to change your life based on the time you've spent in His Word.

## Psalm 16:1-11

True and lasting pleasure is only found in the presence of God.

---

### Read

Read the passage slowly and carefully with an open heart, asking the Holy Spirit to give you words of encouragement, direction, and correction.

---

### Examine

Pick a few verses and look at them more closely to gain a deeper understanding of what the Bible is saying.

---

### Apply

Consider how you will live differently in light of what you read.

- Make a list of some of the most common things teens today want out of life. Circle those that most appeal to you.
- How well do these things line up with the joy God desires for you to experience through your relationship with Him?

---

### Pray

Pray through the passage and your application, asking God to change your heart and to change your life based on the time you've spent in His Word.

## Hebrews 3:12-19

The author of Hebrews provides a sobering warning about the deceitfulness of sin and its desire to lead into false beliefs.

---

### Read

Read the passage slowly and carefully with an open heart, asking the Holy Spirit to give you words of encouragement, direction, and correction.

---

### Examine

Pick a few verses and look at them more closely to gain a deeper understanding of what the Bible is saying.

---

### Apply

Consider how you will live differently in light of what you read.

- What are some specific ways you might need to “watch out” that you don’t develop an “unbelieving heart” (Heb. 13:12)?
- How might you encourage someone in their faith this week?

---

### Pray

Pray through the passage and your application, asking God to change your heart and to change your life based on the time you’ve spent in His Word.