



The Parable of the Prodigal

Summary and Goal

The father of the two sons would not have been expected to behave this way. His younger son might as well have wished him dead when he left home with his inheritance. Yet Jesus tells a different story. This story shows the father welcoming his lost son home with a lavish party. Jesus was teaching us that for people to repent and turn to God is cause for celebration. As we see God's promises being fulfilled around us through life change, we should celebrate as well. To celebrate is to offer a powerful testimony about what truly matters to God and what the kingdom is like.

Main Passages

Luke 15:11-24

Session Outline

1. Illogical Pursuit (Luke 15:11-20)
2. All-Inclusive Rescue (Luke 15:21-23)
3. Unadulterated Joy (Luke 15:24)

Theological Theme

The parable of the prodigal son perfectly encapsulates the mercy and grace of God the Father for those who are in Christ Jesus.

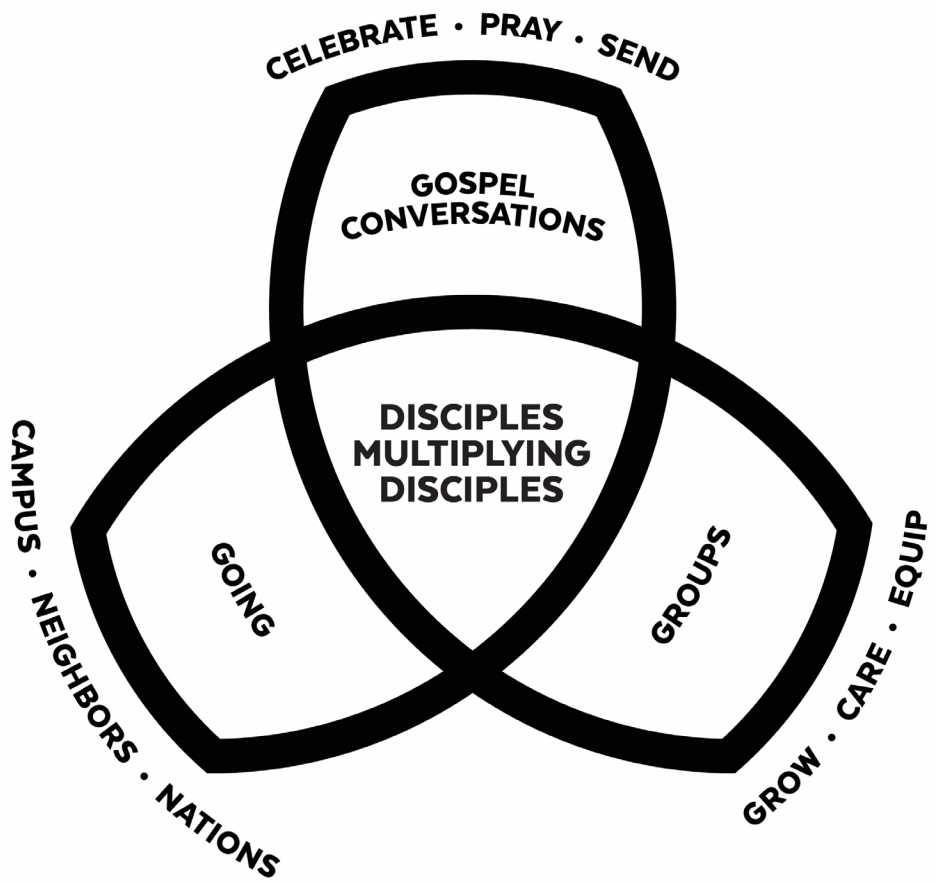
Christ Connection

The mercy and grace of God the Father is available to poor sinners because of the work that Jesus Christ carried out on behalf of sinners.

Missional Application

Those who have been reconciled to the Father and have experienced the blessings of adoption into that family desire to invite others in as well.

Disciples Multiplying Disciples



4

Session Plan

The Parable of the Prodigal

Introduction

- ❓ What do you know about the Old Testament story of Jacob and Rachel? What details can you recount?
- ❓ How does this story illustrate that love compels us to do hard things? How have you experienced this?

Just as Jacob's love for Rachel compelled him to joyfully sacrifice to attain her, so God's love for His people was the basis for His sacrifice for them. In Luke 15, we read three parables about searching. All three point to the value God places on people. Today we will consider the last of those parables, but it is important to remember that Jesus told them together for a reason. For Jesus to repeat the same main idea through three separate parables back to back to back is more significant than you may realize. It's hard to overstate the emphasis that Jesus placed on God being a searching and finding, missionary God.

1. Illogical Pursuit (Luke 15:11-20)

The father had every right to disown his son, forget that he existed, and move on with his life. After all, isn't that what the son did to him? The son made it clear that his father was as good as dead to him and that he only cared about the money that he would receive from him. Why would a father reserve any compassion or kindness for a son like that? It doesn't make sense.

- ❓ What is something you would be willing to search greatly for—even if it seemed foolish to others?
- ❓ How does our willingness to search for something reflect the value we place on that person or thing? What does this teach you about God and His love for people?
- ❓ Application: Have you reflected on the graciousness of your heavenly Father to run to you and throw His arms around you? Have you considered what that cost Him? How might the truth of God's kindness and love toward you in Christ affect the way you live today?

2. All-Inclusive Rescue (Luke 15:21-23)

In the parable of the lost sheep, the shepherd carried the sheep on his shoulders. It is possible that the sheep was hurt. Maybe the walk was too far or dangerous. Or maybe the shepherd was making sure that the sheep would not run away again. In any case, it reflects the mercy and kindness of the shepherd. The shepherd who was strong carried the sheep who was weak. The emphasis here was the shepherd's action on behalf of the lost sheep and the compassion and care that compelled it.

- ❓ What did the father do to show that his reception and rescue of the son was all-inclusive?
- ❓ How might the father's actions in this parable (and the picture of the shepherd at the beginning of Luke 11) remind us of God's strength in our weakness?
- ❓ Application: How does the truth that you didn't contribute to your salvation change the way you worship and obey God?

3. Unadulterated Joy (Luke 15:24)

All three parables in this series (sheep, coin, son) hold a surprise at the end. Jesus concluded each story with an earthly scene of celebration. Again, this seems illogical until we consider the value placed on the sheep, coin, and son and the value placed on God's people by God.

- ❓ What does Jesus' emphasis on celebration teach us?
- ❓ How is it possible that the father could receive the Son without punishing his sin? How is God able to do this for us?
- ❓ Application: Why did you deserve the wrath of God? What has happened with that wrath and punishment that you deserved? How should this lead us to respond with great joy?

Conclusion

- ❓ How should the example of the illogical pursuit of the shepherd and welcome of the father inform how we reach out to those around us?
- ❓ In what ways can we reflect the all-inclusive rescue of God in our efforts to reach out to the lost?
- ❓ What happens in God's rescue of His people that makes it possible for there to be unadulterated joy upon our return?



Expanded Session Content

The Parable of the Prodigal

Introduction

- ❓ What do you know about the Old Testament story of Jacob and Rachel? What details can you recount?
- ❓ How does this story illustrate that love compels us to do hard things? How have you experienced this?

The Bible says that Jacob loved Rachel and the years that he worked for her “seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her” (Gen. 29:20). Jacob loved Rachel deeply and the sacrifice he had to make in order to have her as his wife was nothing to him.

Just as Jacob’s love for Rachel compelled him to joyfully sacrifice to attain her, so God’s love for His people was the basis for His sacrifice for them. Jesus was the fulfillment of that sacrifice and also the herald of it. It is a moving thing to think of Jesus laboring to teach His disciples about the deep love and care that God the Father had for them, all the while preparing to undergo incredible suffering as the ultimate act of God’s deep love and care for them.

Another way to think about this idea is to consider how we respond when we lose something. The amount of time we spend searching for a lost item is directly related to the value we place on that item. The more valuable the object, the more sacrifices we are willing to make to locate it. This is similar to the parable of the treasure buried in a field (Matt. 13:44). When the man found the treasure, he sacrificed all that he had to obtain it.

In Luke 15, we read three parables about searching. All three point to the value God places on people. Today we will consider the last of those parables, but it is important to remember that Jesus told them together for a reason. For Jesus to repeat the same main idea through three separate parables back to back to back is more significant than you may realize. It’s hard to overstate the emphasis that Jesus placed on God being a searching and finding, missionary God.

Session Summary

It makes sense that Luke would make sure and include these stories in his account of Jesus' life and ministry. Luke was a Gentile. In fact, he is the only Gentile writer in the entire canon of Scripture. Being a Gentile, Luke knew what it meant to be on the outside, excluded, and lost. He was not a descendant of Abraham. He was not naturally included in the covenant, though he was a God-fearer. Luke came first to fear the God of Israel and then to love and trust in Christ with no right or reason to boast whatsoever.

You may have noticed as you have read Luke and Acts that Luke quoted and alluded to the Book of Isaiah often. In fact, Luke referenced Isaiah more than any other Old Testament book by far. Why? Because Isaiah spoke over and over of a light for the Gentiles. Luke read and rehearsed and clung to the promises and prophecies of Isaiah. He was a Gentile who was desperate to know the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. When it came time for Luke to write his account of Jesus' life and ministry and the spread of the gospel, he focused on the gospel getting to the Gentiles.

1. Illogical Pursuit (Luke 15:11-20)

The three parables that Jesus told in Luke 15 are illogical. The people (shepherd, woman, father) are terrible strategists. They risk unnecessarily. They waste time and energy for what seems like a lost cause or a poor investment. In the case of the prodigal son, the father had every right to disown his son, forget that he existed, and move on with his life. After all, isn't that what the son did to him? The son made it clear that his father was as good as dead to him and that he only cared about the money that he would receive from him. Why would a father reserve any compassion or kindness for a son like that? It doesn't make sense. Compare the logic of this to what happens in the parable of the lost sheep.

In the first parable of this series of three, Jesus told of a shepherd with 100 sheep in the fold. One had become lost. It was perfectly acceptable for the shepherd to search for it. But there was something different happening here. Jesus made the point of saying that the shepherd left the other 99 to search for the one that was lost. The idea here is that the shepherd's care and concern for his sheep was so overwhelming that he made a seemingly foolish decision to endanger the 99 to rescue the one. We should not take this to mean that God is foolhardy or unwise in His actions. Rather, the point is that God cares deeply for His sheep and will go to great lengths for their rescue.

It seems even stranger that the father would run to welcome his prodigal son in our parable today. The lost sheep was a dumb animal that wandered off. The son was evil toward the father, and knowingly did him harm.

- ❓ What is something you would be willing to search greatly for—even if it seemed foolish to others?
- ❓ How does our willingness to search for something reflect the value we place on that person or thing? What does this teach you about God and His love for people?

There is a little phrase in the parable of the lost sheep you may not have noticed before: “Until he finds it” (v. 5). We don’t know how long it took, but it doesn’t matter. That detail is irrelevant. The shepherd’s search was not determined by a unit of time, but by the success of the mission. There is no doubt about the rescue. That the lost sheep would be recovered was not in question.

In the parable of the prodigal son, the father didn’t go into the distant land to search for his son, but the text does give us an indication about the father’s pursuit of his son. Verse 20 says, “But while the son was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion.” What does that mean? It means that he was watching for him. He was expecting him. This is confirmed when we read what he did next: “He ran, threw his arms around his neck, and kissed him.”

- ❓ Application: Have you reflected on the graciousness of your heavenly Father to run to you and throw His arms around you? Have you considered what that cost Him? How might the truth of God’s kindness and love toward you in Christ affect the way you live today?

In Jewish culture, men did not run. For men, running was considered undignified. For the father to run to his son was to act in a humiliating and shameful way. Yet the father didn’t care about dignity or propriety in that moment—he just wanted his son. As the son was about to make his proposition to work for his father, the father didn’t even let him finish speaking. The father immediately called to his servant and demanded proper clothes for his son who was no doubt in rags and barefooted. He placed a ring on his finger as a sign of full status as son and heir of the father. After this, he called for a huge celebration because his son, who was lost, had now been found. The father’s proclamation that the son who was dead is now alive is an act of absolute divine grace.

2. All-Inclusive Rescue (Luke 15:21-23)

In the parable of the lost sheep, the shepherd carried the sheep on his shoulders. It is possible that the sheep was hurt. Maybe the walk was too far or dangerous. Or maybe the shepherd was making sure that the sheep would not run away again. In any case, it reflects the mercy and kindness of the shepherd. The shepherd who was strong carried the sheep who was weak. The emphasis here was the shepherd's action on behalf of the lost sheep and the compassion and care that compelled it.

- What did the father do to show that his reception and rescue of the son was all-inclusive?

It is amazing that the father ran to meet his son on the road and did not even allow him to finish his apology. The father's forgiveness and rescue of his son was complete and unconditional. The son came prepared to work as a servant in his father's household (v. 19), but the father immediately reinstated him as his beloved son. Right then and there on the road, the father said to the servants (who had no doubt run out after their master to meet the lost son) to bring the best robe, a ring, and shoes to put on his son. Then, he told the servants to prepare for a feast!

- How might the father's actions in this parable (and the picture of the shepherd at the beginning of Luke 11) remind us of God's strength in our weakness?

As we read this parable, and the others, the meaning is clear. The father is God and we are the prodigal son. Ephesians 2:1 says that we were "dead in our trespasses and sins." Like the lost sheep, we were in desperate need of an all-inclusive rescue. Salvation isn't a joint effort between God and people. Christians were lost, hopeless, and dead. They were in need of nothing less than to be thrown over the Rescuer's shoulder and carried home. Christians were the lost coin, the wandering sheep, and the prodigal son. Like the lost sheep, the only thing they contributed to their rescue was the wandering that made it necessary.


- Application: How does the truth that you didn't contribute to your salvation change the way you worship and obey God?

3. Unadulterated Joy (Luke 15:24)


All three parables in this series (sheep, coin, son) hold a surprise at the end. Jesus concluded each story with an earthly scene of celebration. Again, this seems illogical until we consider the value placed on the sheep, coin, and son and the value placed on God's people by God.

The Father's Response

Perhaps the normal parental reaction to the younger son's return would be anger or at least deep disappointment, but this father's response displayed: (1) compassion, (2) love (threw his arms around his neck, and kissed him), (3) celebration (a feast), and (4) joyful restoration of status for his son (a robe of distinction, signet ring of family authority, sandals worn by a son, in contrast to barefoot slaves).

 What does Jesus' emphasis on celebration teach us?


It brings great joy to God when one of His sheep is rescued—when a sinner is saved. The mission of God is marked by joy. God doesn't save sinners begrudgingly and then hold it against them. No, His rescue missions are punctuated by joyous parties. God brings a lost sinner home, that rescue is undergirded and motivated by love and so it also includes joy.

 How is it possible that the father could receive the Son without punishing his sin? How is God able to do this for us?

All three of these parables conclude with a vision of pure, unadulterated joy. How can this be possible? The sheep had wandered off causing a lot of trouble; the son had deeply offended the father. It seems like a punishment would be in order instead of a party, but that's not what happened. The key element of these parables is especially poignant in the third of the series. When the prodigal son returns, the joyful feast infuriates his older brother (vv. 25-32). The older brother isn't so much angry at his little brother's actions as he is angry at the lack of ire in his father's response to the return.

The presence of unadulterated joy in these three parables alludes to one of the most important aspects of the gospel. How can God, who has been deeply offended by a person, joyfully celebrate his or her rescue? The key to understanding the joy is in understanding the rescue. Second Corinthians 5:21 says, "He made the one who did not know sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

The joy is void of bitterness because Jesus drank the bitterness on our behalf. The joy is void of punishment because Jesus took our punishment. The joy is void of wrath because Jesus bore God's wrath that we deserved. Christians wandered off as sinners and turned to their own way, but the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all (Isa. 53:6). When Christians were carried back on the Shepherd's shoulders, we were clothed in the righteousness of Christ.

 Application: Why did you deserve the wrath of God? What has happened with that wrath and punishment that you deserved? How should this lead us to respond with great joy?

Conclusion

The parable of the prodigal son is one of the clearest expressions of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Christians were once prodigal sons. They were lost sheep. But now they are found. They breathe out a sigh of relief and joy when they reflect on the truth that their Shepherd is strong, that He will not come up short in His rescue and plans. Christ has drunk down the bitter cup of the wrath of God to the dregs. For those who are in Christ, there is no wrath left for them. Instead, their cup is filled with the blessings and privileges of being a child of God.

- ❓ How should the example of the illogical pursuit of the shepherd and welcome of the father inform how we reach out to those around us?
- ❓ In what ways can we reflect the all-inclusive rescue of God in our efforts to reach out to the lost?
- ❓ What happens in God's rescue of His people that makes it possible for there to be unadulterated joy upon our return?

Prayer of Response

Ask the Lord to fill your heart with joy and peace knowing that your heavenly father has done everything necessary for your salvation. Ask him to help you reflect on the gospel and be sanctified by that truth. Pray also that this growth in the gospel would compel you and your brothers and sisters in Christ to be bold witnesses of the gospel of Jesus Christ knowing that Jesus said, "Everyone the Father gives me will come to me, and the one who comes to me I will never cast out" (John 6:37).

Additional Resources

- *The Prodigal God* by Timothy Keller
- *The Prodigal Son* by John MacArthur
- *Be Courageous* by Warren Wiersbe

For Next Week

Session Title

- No Turning Back

Main Passages

- Luke 9:51-62

Session Outline

1. Toward Jerusalem (Luke 9:51-56)
2. Follow Me (Luke 9:57-59)
3. Fit for the Kingdom (Luke 9:60-62)

Memorize

²⁴ because this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' So they began to celebrate.

- Luke 15:24

Daily Readings

- Monday - Luke 15:1-7
- Tuesday - Luke 15:8-10
- Wednesday - Luke 15:11-24
- Thursday - Luke 15:25-32

Historical Context of Luke

Purpose

The Gospel of Luke is a carefully researched (1:3), selective presentation of the person and life of Jesus Christ, designed to strengthen the faith of believers (1:3–4) and to challenge the misconceptions of unbelievers, especially those from a Greek background. Its portrait of Jesus is well balanced, skillfully emphasizing his divinity and perfect humanity.

Author

The author of the Third Gospel is not named. Considerable evidence points to Luke as its author. Much of that proof is found in the book of Acts, which identifies itself as a sequel to Luke (Ac 1:1–3). A major line of evidence has to do with the so-called “we” sections of the book (Ac 16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–37; 28:1–16). Most of Acts is narrated in third-person plural (“they,” “them”), but some later sections having to do with the ministry of the apostle Paul unexpectedly shift to first-person plural (“we,” “us”). This indicates that the author had joined the apostle Paul for the events recorded in those passages. Since there are no “we” passages in the Gospel of Luke, that fits with the author stating that he used eyewitness testimony to the life of Jesus (1:2), indicating he was not such an eyewitness himself.

Since Luke wrote both the Third Gospel and the book of Acts (Ac 1:1–3), it is relevant to consider the dating of both books together. The events at the end of Acts occurred around AD 62–63. That is the earliest point at which Acts could have been written. If Acts was written in the early AD 60s from Rome, where Paul was imprisoned for two years (Ac 28:30), the Third Gospel could date from an earlier stage of that period of imprisonment. The other reasonable possibility is during Paul’s earlier two-year imprisonment in Caesarea (Ac 24:27). From that location, Luke would have been able to travel and interview the eyewitnesses to Jesus’s life and ministry who were still alive.

Setting

Traditionally, the Gospel of Luke is believed to have been written after both Matthew and Mark. Those who date Matthew and Mark in the AD 60s or 70s have tended to push the dating of Luke back to the AD 70s or 80s.

Special Features

The Gospel of Luke is the longest book in the New Testament. Focusing on the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, this Gospel is part one of a two-part history, the book of Acts being part two. Both were dedicated to “most honorable Theophilus” (Lk 1:3; Ac 1:1).

Extended Commentary

Luke 15:11-24

15:11–12. Jesus turned to the family setting for his concluding parable to illustrate why he associated with sinners. The story was told succinctly with only the points Jesus wanted to make elaborated. A younger son demanded his share of the estate and got it. There is no indication of why he wanted it or why the father so quickly gave it to him. Later we will see the older brother's attitude and surmise sibling rivalry here, as in the Old Testament stories of Jacob and Esau and of Joseph and his brothers. The younger brother's portion was only a third of the estate if the entire estate were divided. By law, the older brother got a double portion (Deut. 21:17).

15:13–14. The younger son wanted to be on his own. He distanced himself as far as possible from the family. He also took up a new lifestyle. Untrained and inexperienced in money matters, he quickly had many expenses and no income. The result came quickly: no assets. Then a famine hit the land. No one had food or work.

15:15–16. He was fortunate. He found a job, but what a job for a Jew! He fed pigs in a pigpen. Destitute of other resources, he longed to eat what he fed the pigs. How repulsive for a law-abiding Jew. But he had not authority to eat pig food. So he fattened pigs and starved himself.

15:17–19. Finally, his mind went to work again. Humans have the capacity to change. We do not have to remain in the pigpen. We do not have to continue to live as sinners. We can become responsible for our lives. We can quit our riotous living. We can come home.

The younger brother came to his senses: The day laborers on his dad's farm had enough to eat. "And I am about to die from hunger," he said. "I will go back to Daddy and tell him I have sinned against him and against heaven." Note how this ties the story back to the beginning of the chapter and the theme of sinners. No longer are we using animals or objects to talk about the lost. Now we have gotten down to basic facts. People are lost. People need to realize their lost condition and admit it. The younger son's first step is saying, "I am a sinner."

What is a sinner? An unworthy person. One who deserves nothing. Yet a sinner wants something. So the sinner searches for someone who loves the unworthy, who is willing to help the undeserving. The sinful younger brother had forfeited his position as son. He had no more claims on his father, so he applied for a new job—day laborer.

15:20. Focus shifts from son to father. Son is on the move. Father is standing still, waiting to see his son. Here is the poignant portrait of a busy man who has lost one of his chief helpers, taking himself away from his work to wait for a son who may never appear. It is certainly no given that a sinner will repent.

The father did not stay still long. There he was—the son had returned. What joy! What love! What tender compassion filled the father's heart. The old legs started churning. Arms stretched out. Lips reached for a kiss. The family feud was over and forgotten. A son was home.

15:21. Even the joyful welcome did not deter the son from his determined course. He repeated the plea he had rehearsed. Somehow the last line never came out; the job application as a day laborer was never made.

15:22–23. The father never heard his lost son. He had business to attend to. Party time! The son must be properly dressed for the party. Servants dashed off as they were commissioned to get the best robe, a ring, sandals—things all lost long before the pigpen. Other servants ran to the kitchen to prepare the menu the father ordered. Nothing but the best for the son.

15:24. How could the father act like this? Did he not know what the son had done? Of course, but the son had been given up for dead. This was resurrection time. He was lost. We found the precious treasure for which we have hunted. The lost sheep is back. Certainly a lost and found son is worth much more than a coin or a sheep. Celebrate!

What a picture of the Father in heaven. How he does celebrate when the lost are found, when sinners repent. What compassion and love he shows. Why does Jesus associate with sinners? Because heaven loves them and waits patiently for them to return and repent so the celebration can begin. Heaven's citizens are repentant sinners.¹

References

1. Butler, Trent C., and Max Anders. *Luke*. Holman New Testament Commentary. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000.

Author Bio

Trent Butler (Luke)

Trent C. Butler is a freelance author and editor. He served ten years on the faculty of the International Baptist Theological Seminary in Ruschlikon, Switzerland, and for twenty-two years as editor and editorial director for Holman Bible Publishers and LifeWay. He wrote the Word Biblical Commentary volume on Joshua, the Layman's Bible Book Commentary on Isaiah, the Holman Old Testament Commentaries on Isaiah and Hosea through Micah, and the Holman New Testament Commentary on Luke. He served on the editorial Board of the Holman Christian Standard Bible, and edited the Holman Bible Dictionary. Dr. Butler has a Ph.D. in biblical studies and linguistics from Vanderbilt University, has done further study at Heidelberg and Zurich, and has participated in the excavation of Beersheba.

Max Anders (Luke)

Dr. Max Anders is the author of over 25 books, including the bestselling *30 Days to Understanding the Bible*, and is the creator and general editor of the 32-volume Holman Bible Commentary series. He has taught on the college and seminary level and is a veteran pastor. Max provides resources and discipleship strategies at www.maxanders.com to help people grow spiritually.

Timothy Keller (The Prodigal God)

Timothy Keller is the founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, which he started in 1989 with his wife, Kathy, and three young sons. Dr. Keller's books, including the New York Times bestselling *The Reason for God* and *The Prodigal God*, have sold over 2 million copies and been translated into 25 languages.

John MacArthur (The Prodigal Son)

John MacArthur has served as pastor-teacher of Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California, since 1969. His ministry of expository preaching is unparalleled in its breadth and influence. In more than five decades of ministry from the same pulpit, he has preached verse by verse through the entire New Testament and several key sections of the Old Testament. He is Chancellor of the Master's University and Seminary, and can be heard daily on the Grace to You radio broadcast (carried on hundreds of radio stations worldwide). He has authored numerous bestselling books, including *Twelve Ordinary Men* and *One Perfect Life*.

Warren Wiersbe (Be Courageous)

Warren W. Wiersbe, former pastor of the Moody Church and general director of *Back to the Bible*, has traveled widely as a Bible teacher and conference speaker. Because of his encouragement to those in ministry, Dr. Wiersbe is often referred to as "the pastor's pastor." He has ministered in churches and conferences throughout the United States as well as in Canada, Central and South America, and Europe. Dr. Wiersbe has written over 150 books, including the popular BE series of commentaries on every book of the Bible, which has sold more than four million copies. At the 2002 Christian Booksellers Convention, he was awarded the Gold Medallion Lifetime Achievement Award by the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association. Dr. Wiersbe and his wife, Betty, live in Lincoln, Nebraska.