

## FINALLY FREE ENDORSEMENTS

Pastor Wolfmueller is a remarkable pastoral theologian. I always chuckle when I'm in some backwater locale around the globe and someone approaches me with this question, often heavily accented by the speaker's mother tongue: "You know Worldwide Wolfmueller?" Ha! YES! The remarkable clarity of the Gospel, which animates all Pastor W's work, shines even more brightly in this little gem of a book. "He welcomes sinners and eats with them," the religious experts complained of Jesus. This book takes a wondrous look at the third and often ignored character in Jesus' parable of the prodigal: the disgruntled brother. Pastor W speaks to the Pharisee in every one of us and drives us to repentance, forgiveness in Jesus, and joy in living forgiven as we encounter our neighbors.

—PASTOR MATTHEW C. HARRISON, LCMS PRESIDENT

Bryan Wolfmueller is well known for his ability to break down abstract biblical ideas into life-changing spiritual truths. He does it again in this beautiful book by employing insights from Lutheran theology (especially Law and Gospel) and highlighting three slaveries that threaten us and three freedoms lavishly given to us by God through Christ Jesus. This is a perfect study for individuals or groups. Highly recommended!

—REED LESSING, THE EDWIN F. AND ESTHER L. LAATSCH CHAIR OF  
OLD TESTAMENT STUDIES, CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY, ST. PAUL

Bryan Wolfmueller offers a careful and contextual study of a well-known parable and shows how the heavenly Father would tear down walls both of guilt and of pride, which separate us from divine love. The Father's love extends both to the guilt-ridden and self-righteous among us. Highly recommended!

—REV. DR. MARK BRIGHTON, EMERITUS PROFESSOR OF BIBLICAL  
LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE, CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY IRVINE

Wolfmueller has done it again! With pastoral clarity and theological grit, *Finally Free* names the real enemies—living for your appetites, despairing in your guilt, and trusting in your own righteousness—and dismantles them with the Word of Christ. This isn't shallow self-help or flimsy moralism; it's the death of the old Adam—of fleshly indulgence, despair, and pride. But it is also the resurrection of the new man in Baptism. For the weary, the guilty, and the self-righteous alike, this book delivers what only the Gospel can: You do not belong to your sin, your guilt, or your works—you belong to Christ. You are a redeemed child of God.

—REV. DR. MATTHEW RICHARD, PASTOR OF ST. PAUL'S LUTHERAN  
CHURCH, MINOT, NORTH DAKOTA, AND AUTHOR OF  
*WILL THE REAL CHURCH PLEASE STAND UP? SEVEN FALSE CHURCHES*

# FINALLY FREE

Three Lessons in the Parable of the Prodigal Son

BRYAN WOLFMUELLER

CONCORDIA PUBLISHING HOUSE • SAINT LOUIS



Published by Concordia Publishing House  
3558 S. Jefferson Ave., St. Louis, MO 63118-3968  
1-800-325-3040 • cph.org

Copyright © 2025 Bryan Wolfmueller

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of Concordia Publishing House.

The quotation from the Lutheran Confessions in this publication is from *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, second edition © 2006 Concordia Publishing House. All rights reserved.

The quotation from Francis Pieper's *Christian Dogmatics* is © 1950 Concordia Publishing House. All rights reserved.

The quotation from *The Lutheran Hymnal* is © 1941 Concordia Publishing House. All rights reserved.

Manufactured in the United States of America

# CONTENTS

---

A Note About Scripture Translation.....	4
Introduction.....	5
Chapter 1: Belly Slaves .....	11
Chapter 2: Despair .....	25
Chapter 3: Pride.....	41
Conclusion: The Joy of the Angels .....	61

## A NOTE ABOUT SCRIPTURE TRANSLATION

---

All Scripture passages are the author's translation. They are mostly modernized adaptations of the King James Version, with reference to the original languages.

# INTRODUCTION

---

This little book is about the parable of the prodigal son. In that beautiful story, Jesus outlines the three slaveries threatening us and the three freedoms He wants to give us.

Writing a book about such a famous, familiar, and beloved passage of Scripture is a dangerous proposition. How many joyful tears have been shed on that passage in the Bible, where prodigal sinners see themselves embraced in the merciful arms of their gracious heavenly Father? How many sermons have used this text to open heaven and the very heart of God to timid souls afraid that they have “sinned too much” and “gone too far”? There is a risk that any unfolding of this parable would dull the splendor of the Gospel so gloriously held forth by our Lord.

My hope is the opposite. I hope that another look at the parable will add to the wisdom and comfort the Lord wants to give us. Particularly, I'd like to focus on the older brother, who is sulking in the field. When we think of the parable of the prodigal son, we almost forget that there are two sons and that the second son is the entire point of the parable. Will he join the feast?

I'd like to offer two pieces of evidence for this argument.

First, the parable of the prodigal son is the third in a series of three lost-and-found parables in Luke 15. We'll look more closely at this later, but for now, notice that the first two parables are much more straightforward and direct.

A shepherd is in the wilderness with one hundred sheep. One wanders off and is lost. The shepherd searches for the lost sheep, finds it, and has a party with his friends and neighbors to celebrate the sheep's return. Jesus concludes, "I say to you, that likewise, joy shall be in heaven over one sinner who repents, more over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (v. 7).

A woman has ten pieces of silver. One is lost, and she searches into the night to find it. When she finally finds the missing coin, she calls together her friends and neighbors to celebrate that she has found the coin. Jesus concludes this parable, "Likewise, I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (v. 10).

Lost. Found. Joy.

But the third parable, the parable of the prodigal son, adds the element of the older son. We don't know what the ninety-nine never-lost sheep think about the one who wandered off. There is no concern for the nine silver

coins, which were always where they were supposed to be. However, mention of this older brother, offended by his father's joyful generosity and standing alone in the field, is a detail that is both unique and essential to this third parable.

Second, remember the context of all three parables:

Then drew near to [Jesus] all the tax collectors and sinners to hear Him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." (vv. 1-2)

In these three parables, Jesus addresses the murmuring scribes and the grumbling Pharisees. They are offended that Jesus ate with sinners, talked with tax collectors, forgave the sins of the worst kinds of people, and welcomed the worst into the kingdom of God. The scribes and Pharisees are offended by God's mercy. They are the older brother standing in the field refusing to join the party, incredulous that the father would kill the fatted calf for his wayward, wasteful, sinful, irresponsible, lazy, and wicked brother.

That's the point. Jesus is after the scribes and Pharisees. He is exposing their bad doctrine and false theology.

He presents their theological errors about God, the Law, righteousness, and eternal life. He demonstrates how flawed and misleading their thinking and teachings are.

The scribes and Pharisees are all about the Law. They arrange their lives in such a way so that they can claim to keep the Law and the commands of God. Their hope is in their obedience. They stand in contrast to Jesus' teaching of God's grace and mercy. Because of this, the scribes and Pharisees are the bad guys in the Gospels, serving as the foil to Jesus' teaching.

However, and we must not miss this, Jesus loves the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus also died for the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus' mercy extends to the scribes and Pharisees.

When Jesus, in this parable, is exposing their joyless refusal to join the celebration of God's grace, He does so because He wants these scribes and Pharisees to participate in this joy, to be part of the kingdom of God.

I often hear preaching about how Jesus loves the sinners and the outcasts, but He blasts away at the religious rulers. "Jesus loves the sinners and despises the self-righteous religious people." No. Jesus loves the scribes and Pharisees. He loves the self-righteous. Jesus shed His blood for sinners who don't even know they've sinned.

He is the Savior for people who have no idea they need saving. The father loves the older brother sulking in the field and wants him to share in the joyful feast. Jesus is not content for the scribes and Pharisees to stand there grumbling while He eats with these sinners. He wants them to sit down and join the meal.

Jesus' desire for all to join Him is essential for us.

We each have a sinful flesh that would love to wander from the Father's house and do whatever we want.

We each have a troubled conscience that wonders if we've sinned too much to be welcomed back into the Father's care.

And we each have a little Pharisee living in our hearts. We consider ourselves to be good and righteous based on our own efforts.

Each of these three inclinations is a form of slavery. Each is illustrated in this parable. And our dear Lord Jesus desires to set us free from each of them.



## BELLY SLAVES

---

FATHER, GIVE ME THE PORTION OF THE  
GOODS THAT FALLS TO ME. (LUKE 15:12)

Jesus introduces us to the youngest son in the middle of his rebellion. He goes to his father and asks for his inheritance.

What an insult. The son is saying, “I wish you were dead. The inheritance is more valuable to me than you are.” Why? We can discern some of his motivations from the actions that follow.

“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” (v. 13).

The younger son is tired of his father, the family farm, the early mornings, the curfew, the discipline, the rules, the work, and the requirements of his father. He feels hemmed in, bound up, and constrained by his father. He feels enslaved.

He’s not. This is *not* the first slavery; the father’s house is not a prison, but the devil will tempt us to feel this way. Leaving the father’s house is going to feel like freedom. Rebellion, at first, tastes like emancipation.

Imagine this younger son with new sandals, a trimmed beard, a wallet full of money, and an imagination full of exotic towns—and the exotic women who inhabit those towns. Imagine the smile on his face as he steps through the gate, off his father’s farm, and breathes in his new life. Let’s stop the action and pretend we’ve met this younger son there and talk to him.

“You look happy!”

“For the first time in my life!” he says, buoyantly.

“What’s going on?” we ask.

“The old man’s given me my inheritance. I don’t belong to him anymore. No more up with the roosters. No more lunch in the fields. No more ‘early to bed, early to rise’ nonsense. I can finally do what I want and live life on my terms. I’m finally free.”

“Where are you going?”

“Don’t know.”

But we know. We know where this road ends. We know that it wanders through bars and beds, loneliness amid crowds, and longing that is somehow never satisfied until there is no more money, no more “friends,” and then nothing but a truly empty stomach groaning to eat with the pigs.

The first slavery is belly slavery—slavery to our appetites and passions.

“And when he had spent all, a mighty famine arose 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 the fields to feed the swine. And he longed to fill his belly with the husks that the pigs ate, but no one gave him anything” (vv. 14–16).

The journey that started when he stepped off his father’s farm ends here in a stranger’s field. That bright, burning lust ends in grime. That hunt for pleasure turns up empty. It always does. Hunger and lust are never satisfied.

This is not a uniquely Christian insight. Almost all philosophers recognize that you cannot give free rein to your lusts; you cannot simply run after pleasure. Hedonism ends in disaster. The laws set by temporal authorities, culture, and self-discipline must restrain our desires. But the fire of lust burns hot, and our sinful flesh is bent on rebellion.

Paul describes it this way: “Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, their mind is on earthly things” (Philippians 3:19). Their god is their belly; they are serving their corrupt desires; they are slaves to their lust.

However, note carefully that this slavery initially appears to be freedom.

“While they promise themselves freedom, they themselves are the slaves of corruption: for by whom a man is overcome, by the same he is brought into bondage” (2 Peter 2:19).

What a perfect verse to capture this paradox. Slavery to the corruption of our sinful flesh is accomplished under the banner of liberation and the self-promise of freedom.

The younger son had no idea he was leaving freedom for slavery. He thought the very opposite. He thought he was escaping the tyranny of his overbearing father to be free to do what he thought was best. This trick is as old as the world. It reminds us of how the devil tempts Eve (see Genesis 3:1–6).

“Did God really say that you are not supposed to eat from every tree in the garden?”

“We may eat,” Eve responds, “of the fruit of the trees of the garden, but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, ‘You shall not eat of it, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’”

“You will not surely die.” Here, we carefully note the devil’s argument. “*God knows* that in the day you eat, your

eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

“God knows.” The devil is not too concerned about what Eve thinks about the fruit. Instead, the devil is concerned about how Eve is thinking about God, or better, what Eve thinks God is thinking about her.

“God knows that you won’t die. God knows that the fruit is good. In fact, God knows that the fruit will make you like Him, and that’s why He has forbidden you from eating it. He’s holding something back from you. He’s keeping you down. His rules are for Him, not for you. He does not have your best interests in mind. And if you are going to be truly free, you have to break through the slavery of His restrictions.”

The devil convinced Eve and Adam and continues to try to convince all of their children that the Law of God is what enslaves us. To be free to live how we want to live, to do what we want to do, to chase after our desires, to give free rein to our sinful flesh—this is the slavery that the devil offers as freedom.

It’s an astonishingly simple argument that happens repeatedly in our conscience.

“You want to do that thing?” the devil asks.

“Yeah.”

“I want you to do it too. We’re on the same team. But you know who doesn’t want you to do it?”

“God.”

“Yup. He’s against you. He doesn’t want you to be happy.” Whatever. Whatever.

It’s a foolish argument with an incorrect and blasphemous conclusion, but it’s very seductive to us sinners who “want to do that thing.”

Let me illustrate how this slavery works. Imagine you’re walking through some frontier town in the Old West. You walk past the jail, and sitting there, behind bars, is the devil.

“What are you doing out there?” he asks.

“What do you mean? I’m walking along the street, headed toward the general store,” you respond.

“Oh,” he says, “I see. You think you’re free out there.”

“Yes,” you respond, confused. “I’m free out here, and you are in jail.”

“You’ve got it all wrong,” he argues. “Freedom is in here. In here, we do whatever we want. Out there are laws and rules, and the sheriff is breathing down your neck.

Do this. Don't do that. In here, there are no rules. We do what we want. We are truly free.”

To prove his point, he takes a shot of whiskey and kicks the person next to him in the shins.

“That looks like fun,” you say as you walk into the cell.

“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” (Luke 15:13).

*I am a belly slave, and I live in the midst of belly slaves.*

Belly slavery is not only an individual problem. Entire cultures can be enslaved to their passions and deceived by the faux freedom of libertinism. The classic name for this is *hedonism*. Hedonism claims pleasure is the highest good and the pursuit of pleasure is the best life. We live in a hedonistic time, in a hedonistic culture.

Oh, the irony. Culture is usually a prohibitive force—something to fill in the gaps between what is illegal and what is wrong. It might not be unlawful to talk rudely to a stranger, but it would be wrong, and the culture sets those norms in place. It might not be illegal for a young dating couple to lie down together and act as though they are married, but it would be wrong, and the culture establishes those norms. Culture should have names for