Connection with Unit Theme: To complement the small group study *The Problem With Pleasure*. Worldly pleasure always has a bottom to it. Both the prodigal son and Solomon found this out the hard way. They had the resources and the opportunity to take pleasure to its end—and what they found was rock bottom. It’s only at the right hand of the Father that we discover pleasures evermore.

Introduction:

Seventy percent of parents and teenagers, according to a study done by Nestle Trust, believe that the reason young people commit crimes is due to a lack of activities and general boredom; in a town where meth labs out number basketball courts, boredom is not only rampant, it is also understandable.

These are the opening words of an article exploring the relationship between boredom among teens and crime. One has to wonder if it was boredom that led to the prodigal sons offensive request to his father. Certainly he believed that his present life was not fulfilling him. So he set out on a quest to find fulfillment and joy—a quest which would eventually lead him to emptiness.

1. **Worldly pleasures have a bottom**
   
   Jesus wants the hearer of his story to realize that this young man did not lack resources or opportunity in his pursuit of pleasure. He had all of his inheritance and he had the whole world at his disposal. But eventually the money ran out. He “spent everything” and he had bad timing; it happened in the midst of a famine.

   This is how the author of Hebrews describes worldly pleasures as “fleeting”. All across the Scriptures the pleasures of the world are shown to be unfulfilling. They always have an end and a bottom to them. It’s like riding a roller coaster—it’s exciting at first but eventually you get accustomed to the thrill and you need a bigger and better coaster. It’s also a bit like the sad story of those who have won the lottery. What seems to be an endless supply of cash inevitably wears thin. Many who have won the lottery end up either broke, dead, or completely miserable.

2. **God graciously lets us find the bottom**
   
   The word “prodigal” has come to mean one who is lost or who has went far away. But the word originally refers to one who is lavish and spends wildly. The prodigal son would not have been cheered by Jesus’ original audience. He is offensive. He practically wishes his father was dead, calls upon his father to do something unheard of and possibly even illegal (giving inheritance while living). Though Jesus uses him as a foil against the curmudgeonly older brother the story doesn’t truly work unless we experience a bit of disdain for this foolish little brother.

   But his story is our story. J.C. Ryle says it well:

   This is our likeness. We are all naturally proud and self-willed. We have no pleasure in fellowship with God. We long to depart, and go afar away from Him. We spend our
time, and strength, and faculties, and affections — on things that cannot profit. The covetous man does it in one way; the slave of lusts and passions in another way; and the lover of pleasure in another way. In one point alone are all agreed. Like sheep, we all naturally "go astray, and turn every one to his own way." (Isaiah 53:6.) In the younger son's initial conduct, we see the natural heart of every man. He who knows nothing of these things, has yet much to learn. He is spiritually blind. The eyes of his understanding need to be opened. The worst ignorance in the world, is not to know ourselves.  

It is not until he finds himself in the pig pen that the prodigal son’s eyes are opened. It is only when he hits rock bottom that he sees the emptiness of a life filled with sinful pleasure. As Ryle would go on to say, “Sin is a hard master — and the servants of sin always find it out, sooner or later, to their cost.” God will graciously lead us to a place where we are emptied by the toll of sin. And it is here that He has us exactly where he wants us.

3. God gives pleasure without bottom
The prodigal son remembers how good he had it when he lived at home. He compares the pig sty to the loving home which he left. And it is here that we see his deep repentance. It is also here that we see the Father’s great love. He actually runs to this repentant son. It’s an unexpected turn in the story. The original audience would not have expected such a response. They would have been shaking their head in agreement with the old brother. They had yet to learn the lesson that God not only gives to us a kingdom without bottom but he also delights to do this.

Consider the precious truths of Psalm 16:11. Abundant joy. Eternal pleasures. Do you know what that means? At his right hand there is pleasure without bottom.

Conclusion:

The main point of the prodigal son isn’t about the younger brother. It’s more about the older brother. But even more still it’s about the great love of a God who is filled with bottomless joy. The prodigal son exposes to us the emptiness of pursuing worldly pleasures. But it also shows us the emptiness of pursuing stale religiosity. There isn’t lasting pleasure in either. It’s only in the Father and enjoyment of His grace that we truly find fulfillment and meaning.

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1 http://www.gracegems.org/Ryle/115.htm