

LUKE 15:20-32 12-2-12

Prodigal Son pt.3

"The Reception By the Father"

(Luke 15) We come today to our concluding study from the parable of the prodigal son. The final act of our dramatic three part mini-series. In a search for independence and excitement the prodigal son left his family for life in the far country. But instead of finding freedom and fun he found hunger and bondage and disgrace. In the midst of his pain, and partly because of it, he repented. He saw the foolishness of what he had done, he saw the mess he had made of his life, and he saw anew the goodness of the father he had abandoned. So he determined to go back home, as humiliating as it might be, he was going home to confess his sin and to ask for help. **20a** *So he got up and came to his father.* In the time of his need the young man goes to his father. Now in a sense that is a bit odd. Odd in the sense that the one person in this world who had most reason to hate this boy is his father. It is his father whom he insulted by demanding his inheritance before it was due. It was his father whose counsel and instruction he had rejected by sowing his wild oats. It is his father whose name he had disgraced by the way he was living. It was the wealth of his father for which the man had labored for years that the boy had wasted. One might think that the last place he would go in his condition would be back to his Dad. But that is where he goes. Why? It is because he knows that the Father is the only one who can meet his needs, his need of forgiveness, his need of food, his need of employment. No, it would not be easy to go back to this one whom he had offended. It was certainly a painful and fearful thing but he did it because there was no where else to turn. Just so, the sinner who has offended his God and trampled upon his law and stands under the just condemnation of the Almighty can turn for deliverance to no other than this One whom he has so greatly injured. Your sins are against God but if you have any hope of being free of those sins you must go back to God. There is salvation in no one else. The father was everything to this boy. He was his dad, he was his prospective employer, his judge, and his only hope of food. By the time the young man had made it home from the far country he would have been so hungry and weary that rejection from the father would have meant death. He was staking everything on the mercy of his father. So you can imagine the fear, the anxiety, the trepidation of soul that filled the young man as he approached the house from which he had so boldly departed. How would his father respond? He knew his father to be a gentle, loving man but after all everyone has a limit to their patience. In one of his hymns Wesley asks the question, *Depth of mercy! Can there be mercy still reserved for me?*

Can my God His wrath forbear, me the chief of sinners spare? In the next verse he reflects upon his sin. *I have long withstood his grace, long provoked him to his face. Would not hearken to his calls, grieved him by a thousand falls.* Is it possible that this offended God could forgive? It is a question of the utmost importance. It is a question that would trouble the soul of the prodigal until he knew for sure. It was in the hand of the Father to crush the boy with just a word. Maybe he would say, *Depart from me. You are no son of mine. I don't even know who you are.* It is in the hand of God to crush, to righteously, justly, crush sinners. Still we come to Him. How will the father respond? The moment of truth was ahead. I think you can relate to the boy. Remember those times when you had something very important to ask someone? Maybe you were seeking a lady's hand in marriage or even just asking her for a date and you were nervous. You were afraid she would say *no* or maybe laugh in your face. Nothing hurts like a laughed-in face. You prepared your speech making sure you said everything just right. The prodigal did that too. In verses 18 and 19 he rehearses what to say **18-19** *I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men."* This kind of request makes you vulnerable. It seems that the whole world hinges on the response to your question. For the prodigal it really did. Such encounters we are prone to postpone, but the prodigal could see that his needs were urgent so *he got up and came to his father.*

In so doing he had done the most important thing of his life.

I commented three weeks ago on the testimony of Luther Hansley. Luther is a friend of mine who, for years, ran a mission in Haiti. His biography is strangely similar to that of the prodigal. He was the son of a godly pastor but as a teen rebelled, left home and wasted his life going from drug festival to drug festival to rock concert. Is there a difference between the two? After two years of this he was at an Allman Brothers concert in Atlanta and decided he was sick of his life. He said that in the dark of that night in Atlanta as he sat and thought about his life he heard someone saying *Jesus saves Jesus saves*, repeating it over and over. When Luther located this man he found that he was high. The two of them hitchhiked together. Luther and the guy saying *Jesus saves*. The first ride they got threw them out. But then they got a hitch from a guy headed to Florida on I-75 which ran right by Ocala where Luther's parents lived. He said he had not been in touch with his parents for two years. He didn't know if they were still there or if they still cared. But he got off the interstate, went to a pay phone and dialed the number. His mother answered and he said, "*Mom,*

this is Luther. I'm down here at the interstate. I want to come home." His mother said, *"I'll be right there."*

How was the prodigal received? Did the father grant his request to be a servant? Read on dear people and rejoice in what you find. **20** *So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.* Wow! The spotlight of our story which was on the prodigal is now on the Father. Really the major emphasis of our story is not on the stupidity or waywardness of the boy but on the compassion and concern of the Father. It is a story about the mercy of God towards lost sinners. The mercy, grace, compassion of God. Do you see it here? God is represented by a father who was always praying and looking and longing for his son to come home. As he worked in the field he would often lift up his eyes toward the road in hope. Day after day he did this with no sign of the boy's return, not knowing if he was dead or alive. Whether I could imagine what he would feel before I had a child of my own I don't know but I can feel it now. I've sat with some of you here and felt your pain over a prodigal child. I've groaned in my prayers for your children. I expect most of you are like me; you can feel this man's longing and his pain. And the incredible thing is that all the pathos and longing felt by such a father is ascribed to our God. That is truly amazing.

We see what he does when the boy comes back. He must have looked down the road on this particular day and seen a dot out on the horizon. The pace of his heart began to quicken and he took a closer look as he was already moving toward the distant figure. At first it was a hunch, but then as he studied the build and the stride of this traveler he knew it was his son. And then what did he do? Did he retreat into his study and light a cigar, preparing to look at his boy and say, "I told you so"? It says he felt compassion. His heart was moved by the pitiful condition of his child. Then -- he ran! He ran toward the boy! In middle eastern countries old men don't run! Their robes would fly all over, it was undignified, it was not proper. But this man ran! And when he reached the boy he threw his arms around him and kissed him over and over again. Again I say this man is representing God. Emil Bruner writes this:

The major theological criticism made of this parable is that there is no cross in it, that it tends to be too sentimental. It is said to depict a God who is so much a God of love that there is no justice, no holiness. The father's run and unconditional forgiveness are thought to say to all the wayward, in effect, "you can run away and there won't be any price, there won't be any probation. Simply come back and we will wink at everything you have done." That is the criticism. But I submit that in the father's run there is

the intimation of Jesus Christ coming to the cross. The father's run is that terrible sprint from heaven to the wood. There is holiness, there is justice. Someone had to pay a price, and the father paid it. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself

Just as the prodigal's father laid aside his dignity so the son of God laid aside the glory of heaven to be joined to dirty sinners. Amazing! We can use that word lightly, but not here. Dear people do you see what your God is like?! Some of you, I know, are like my friend who told me that although she was in a Bible teaching church she thought of God as a perfectly holy and aloof deity who was always looking upon her with disgust. She did not understand the mercy of God to us. She did not understand how much her Father loved her. Can you see it? Can you see how precious you are to God? I John 3:1 *See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God.* Our being taken in as children does not show forth how great we are but how great the love of God is. *See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God.* Someone has said that if God had a refrigerator your picture would be on it. If He had a wallet, your photo would be in it. You are so precious to God that He calls you His very own daughter, His very own son.

This love became real to the prodigal. He could reason that his father was kind but he really didn't know the half of it. So many, apart from Christ, may say that God is loving but until you actually come to him you don't know the half of it. Psalm 34:8a *O taste and see that the Lord is good.* 8 *O taste and see that the Lord is good; How blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him.* As his father was kissing him the son was beginning to understand that. I suspect that he knew what the answer would be, but he had rehearsed this speech a hundred times so he had to give it 21 *'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'* The reception he received from the father did not change his mind about himself. He did not think, "Wow, I must really be something to merit this kind of treatment from my Dad." What changed was his view of his daddy. He thought, "my dad is something special. 22 *But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet.* The best robe was given to signify a guest of honor; the ring was a symbol of authority; and the sandals were a sign of sonship. The father was saying to his son in this that, "I am receiving you back not as a servant but as a son." Slaves did not have shoes. Only sons had shoes. Only sons could wear the ring of authority, only honored guests would wear the robe. And the message here for us is that when God saves us , when he forgives our sin he makes us

something more than forgiven sinners. We become precious sons. We are taken from our poverty and degradation with the pigs and placed not simply in a clean room with some bread, we are welcomed into the rich courts of the father to be with him and to feast from his table. We were enemies of God, under his wrath and headed for hell. When God saves us, he doesn't just make us servants, he lifts us up to be sons of the Most High. One has said that God took him from the guttermost to the uttermost, from the pits of sin to the palatial splendor of the father's house where we have spiritual riches lavished upon us in Christ. **23-24** *bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate;* ²⁴ *for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.* 'And they began to celebrate.

You might expect our story to end by saying that they all lived happily ever after. But it does not. There is a sour note sounded in the midst of the celebration. Let's read about that **25-32** *Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing.* ²⁶ *And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be.* ²⁷ *And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.'* ²⁸ *But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him.* ²⁹ *But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends;* ³⁰ *but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.'* ³¹ *And he said to him, 'Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours.* ³² *But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.'*'' Older brother, who had never strayed into the far country, begins throwing a tantrum. If he were a four year old he would be on the floor kicking his feet saying, "That's not fair." As it is, he refused to go into the house so that the father has to come out to plead with him to join the party. What is this fella's problem? He is angry, and he is angry over the mercy which his father has shown to little brother. This young man is outraged by grace. The very idea that this son who had wasted his father's money on wild living should be admitted back into the house with a party is unbearable to him. He is not only jealous but his sense of justice is offended. Why did Jesus throw in this part at the end of an otherwise delightful tale? Why? Remember that this is a parable and parables are designed to teach. The three parables in Luke 15 are all given to us in a particular context. Remember that? 15:**1-2** *Now all the tax collectors and the*

*sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him.*² *Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."* Sound familiar? The complaint of the older brother is the complaint of the Pharisees and scribes. Clearly, this is the group represented in our story by the older brother. They were people who grumbled when Jesus showed mercy to prodigals. They would murmur to themselves, "unheard of" says one. "Abomination" says another. "Outrageous" they say. And indeed it is. There is something outrageous about the grace of our Lord. There is no point in arguing with people about this point. Just agree and praise God for His grace - outrageous as it may be.

This is what the older brother should have done. But no, he was concerned about justice; he was concerned that he get his and his brother get his. He was committed to a religion of what? Of grace? No, he was committed to a religion of works righteousness just as were the pharisees whom Jesus rebuked. There is no room for grace in the religion of the older son. Some of you have read Garrison Keillor's bestseller called *Lake Wobegon Days*. In his fictional town of Lake Wobegon there is a Catholic church with a great name. It is called *Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility Catholic Church*. Perpetual responsibility is all you hear from some churches and some brothers.. No word of grace, no word about the compassion of the Lord. The kind of people with that religious outlook are usually like the older brother. He was outwardly moral. He was living a respectable life. But where is the devotion? Where is the gratitude to his father? It is so delightful for me to meet people who exude a tremendous gratitude to Jesus for saving them from sin. But gratitude has no place in a religion of works. After all what is there to be grateful for? If God is blessing me it must be because I deserve it. In fact, we wonder how God could ever let hard times come to someone like me. You see this so clearly in the older brother. Look at what he says **29a** *Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours.* Now there is a respectful attitude huh? **29b-30** *you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends;*³⁰ *but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.* What is the point? "Dad, you aren't fair to me. I have been such a good boy." In fact, he says he has been a perfect boy. And he says, "Dad, you've never done anything nice for me." There is self pity here that is rooted in self righteousness. Garfield, the cartoon cat, once said, "I live for 3 things, food, sleep and self pity, and you can only rob me of two of those." But the ground of self pity is the idea that I deserve better than I am getting. But that is a lie, a lie. The older son can't see that he too is a prodigal. He has a bitter spirit

and an entitlement mentality. He is ungrateful. No, he never left home physically, but he did in his heart. His perspective on his life with Father is what? *I have been so incredibly privileged to share life with you, dear Poppa?* Not quite. He says, "so many years I have been serving you." He's the son of a wealthy man but he acts like he's been a slave. The younger boy comes to his father saying, "I am not worthy;" the older son says, "I deserve better than this." Whose attitude do you prefer? God agrees with you.

We are not told how the older son responds to the appeal of the father, but the story ends with the younger son in the house enjoying the party and the older son outside. He was too good to join his rotten kid brother. If you are too holy to be with sinners, you are too holy to be with Jesus because that is where you will find him. Some of you will get a look at the population of heaven and turn away because you don't want to be with a crowd like that. You have failed to see that you too are a sinner in need of mercy. Oh, your sins may be more respectable than others but you too need to be washed by the water of God. One of the things we Presbyterians do at our regional presbytery meetings is listen to the testimony of men who believe God has called them into the gospel ministry. I think I have heard over 200 of these in my lifetime, and one can learn a lot from the big picture they supply. Half of these brothers grew up in all-American type homes and came to Christ early in life. The other half were saved out of a background of crime and drugs, but all know they are sinners and so have a heart of gratitude for the Savior. Their sins are different but they all know where they stand. They all have an appreciation of grace.

Why did Jesus tell this story? What was the response He was looking for in his hearers? I believe there are three. (1) He told this story so sinners would repent and come in trust to Father. (2) He told this story so that self-righteous older brothers would come to appreciate grace and join the party God is throwing. (3) He told this story so that all would love God for loving sinners. First, he told this story so sinners would repent, so that prodigals would leave their sin and come home to the Father. Some of you are to some extent where the prodigal was. You have rejected your God and you know it. Jesus says to repent, to come home and he shows you that when you do you will find a reception that is overwhelmingly warm and tender. You have a choice of running away from God to fill your needs or running to Him. The invitation of the parable is *Taste and see that the Lord is good*. When you give your life to Christ you will find forgiveness and more. You will be made a son of the living God. John 1:**12** *as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name*. Receive Him. Believe in Him.

Secondly, Jesus told this story so that the self-righteous would appreciate grace. This is for you who think your life is really together and God has become your debtor. When things go badly you figure God has forgotten just who you are and how much you have done for him. You resent the Father's heart for prodigals and won't join his party because it is "unseemly." You are not who you think you are. Confess your sin, fall on your knees and ask for mercy from a father whose heart you have grieved. And then open your heart to other sinners even as Jesus, the righteous one, opened his heart to you. At the end of our story, it is the older son who is outside, who is missing the party and the story leaves it open-ended for older brothers. Will you come in and celebrate? O will you cling to your pride.

Thirdly, Jesus told this story so that we would all love God for loving sinners. One of our hymns says this: "*O could I speak the matchless worth, O could I sound the glories forth, which in my Savior shine. I'd sing His glorious righteousness, and magnify the wondrous grace which made salvation mine.*" This parable leads us to magnify, to make much of the grace that brought salvation to me, to the prodigal, to lost sinners whom he takes from the pig sty of sin and sits at his table in the heavenly feast. I will sing of the mercies of the Lord forever. I will sing of the mercies of the Lord. But it would sound much better if we did it together. So let's conclude our study of this great parable with a great hymn by Wesley. (on screen) The first verse says, "*And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Savior's blood?*" The emphasis, as we read it or sing it should be on the first person pronoun. "*And can it be that **I** should gain an interest in my Savior's blood. Died **He** for **me**, who caused His pain, for **me** who **Him**, to death pursued? Amazing love! How can it be, that Thou my God shouldst die for me.*" I love this hymn because it is the expression of a prodigal, of someone who knows he is a wretched, unworthy sinner, and thus stands in awe and wonder at the colossal love of an offended God. How I pray that you could sing this with understanding and with passion.