

**Luke 15:1-3, 11-32 - “This Man Receives Sinners”**

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Even though Jesus’ parable in our Gospel reading for today is usually referred to as the parable of the prodigal son, the opening remarks of our text directs our attention more toward the older son in Jesus’ parable. We’re told that *“tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear [Jesus]. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, ‘This man receives sinners and eats with them.’*” So Jesus told them this parable which included a self-righteous older son who was grumbling about his father for not only eating with his younger brother, but providing a great feast for him.

When it comes to the church family, which of the two sons can you relate to more? Have you gone away from the church for a time and come back, like the younger son? Or, like the older son, have you never physically left but at times look down your nose at newcomers or those who have left and returned? Whatever the case may be, Jesus has some good news for all of us in His parable about The Prodigal Son, The Grumbling Son, and The Merciful Father.

Jesus begins by telling us about a younger son who said to his father, *“Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.”* He was talking about his inheritance, which is usually distributed after the death of our parent’s. So, by his request, he was basically saying that he wished his father was dead! Such a demand was a clear sign of this younger son’s disrespect for his father, and evidence of a conflict between the two.

According to the custom of those days, when there was a conflict between two people in a community, like the one that existed between the younger son and his father, a third party would do their best to mend the broken relationship. This third party would be the one closest to those involved in the conflict. In this case, that responsibility would have gone to the older son. His silence at the beginning of the parable would be seen as a refusal to take on that responsibility, and a sign of conflict in his heart.

That conflict in the heart of the older son becomes even more obvious when the younger son returns and his father welcomes him back with open arms. In general, people in the Middle East have a high regard for a father’s authority. This was especially true in Jesus’ day. Therefore, if the father welcomed his younger son back into the family with an embrace and a kiss, *“the best robe...a ring...shoes,”* and a celebration feast, this was a sign to whole community (including the older son) that they too should welcome him back. After all, it was the father who would have been hurt most by the younger son’s earlier actions. So, if the father forgave him, why shouldn’t everyone else? For this his son *“was dead and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.”*

But the older son didn’t follow his father’s lead, instead (as I mentioned earlier) he had the same complaint about the father’s actions toward his younger brother that the Pharisees and scribes had with Jesus’ actions toward sinners. *“This man receives sinners and eats with them.”*

The older son continued to show his true colors when he said to his father, *“Look, these many years I have served you.”* The Greek word for *“served”* (δουλεύω) could also be translated *“slaved.”* *“These many years I have slaved away for you.”* Then he makes the bold claim, *“and I never disobeyed your*

*command.*” This was the same claim of the religious leaders, who believed that they were keeping God’s commandments perfectly and, therefore, were not in need of repentance or a Savior.

How might we fit into the words and actions of the older son? Even though we confessed our sins earlier in the service, do we still think that our sins don’t make us as bad as other sinners? Do we say, “Chief of sinners thou I be, you are really worse than me!?” Or, are we happy to receive God’s mercy and forgiveness when it comes to our sins, but when it comes to the sins of others do we, like the older son, think that God should not be so quick to forgive them; that God should make them pay for their sins? Oops! That’s the works righteous thinking of the Pharisees and scribes again.

The truth both of these sons were sinners (like all of us) and unworthy of their father’s mercy, but the father’s response to both was the same. Despite their sinful behavior, the father went out to both of them to assure them of his unconditional love. This was not the normal action of a nobleman in those days, especially when the father ran out to his younger son. For a nobleman with long robes to run, he would have had to gather up his robes and expose himself. This would have been considered a humiliating and shameful thing for a nobleman to do, especially for a belligerent son. Does this mean that the Father was wishy-washy when it came to the Law and discipline? Was he accepting of their sinful behavior?

In answer to those questions let’s consider God’s response to our sins through His Son, Jesus Christ. Instead of becoming a man so that He could give us what we deserve because of our sins, He took our shameful sins upon Himself and allowed Himself to be completely stripped of his clothes and to suffer a shameful death on a cross. And, like the father in Jesus’ parable, Jesus did all this before any repentance on our part. *“While we were still sinners, Christ died for us”* (Romans 5:8). Jesus’ damning death on a cross clearly shows that He was not soft on sin. But at the same time He was merciful and loving toward us sinners.

It’s through such overwhelming love that the Holy Spirit works as a third party to heal our broken relationships with God by exposing our sinful, unloving, self-righteous attitudes, and giving us a faith that enables us to repent of our sins and humbly receive God’s merciful forgiveness. This is what happened in Jesus’ parable when the father, with unrestrained love, greeted his sinful, younger son with a hug and a kiss. The younger son at this point, it appears, truly repents of his sins which made him an unworthy son, by not offering his solution about working for his father as a hired servant. Instead he humbly received his father’s gifts which welcomed him back as a son who inherits the gifts of his father, instead of as a hired servant who works for them. This speaks of the life giving effect of the free gift of the Gospel; Christ crucified for our salvation.

Children’s Sermon: What is it that makes you priceless? Is it what you make of yourself? Maybe you work real hard to make lots of money, or to become the best doctor, teacher, mom or dad ever. These are things which are worth a lot to other people and can be used to help them, but is it the things you do that makes you priceless? No, since nothing we do is perfect, it’s always stained by sin."

Now think about what the perfect Son of God did when He became a man in Jesus Christ so that He could die on a cross to pay for your sins and save you. What does that say about how much you are worth to God? You are priceless!

And when you let other people know that the Son of God was willing to become a man in Jesus Christ and die on a cross to also pay for their sins, you let them know that they are also priceless! All because of what God makes of us through His Son.

All glory be to God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.