

I am going to ask that you take a pause with me for just a moment to evaluate the words to this song. ... Do these words express the **reality** of your relationship with Christ... or is this mostly **wishful** thinking...? When we sing a song like this... are your thoughts ever along the lines of... "*I'd **like** for it to be this way... I really **do** want to sense Christ's love rolling as a mighty ocean in its fullness over me... But to be perfectly honest ... that is **not** my normal experience... I know this **must** be true for some... and I am singing this with a **hope** that someday... it will be an **absolute** in my life..."*

*O the deep, deep love of Jesus,
Vast, unmeasured, boundless, free!
Rolling as a mighty ocean
In its fullness over me.*

Do you sing this in **genuineness** as your own personal experience... or is it merely a **hope** that it is true for others and will **eventually** be for you...?

As you ponder this... let me raise another issue of concern. ... I also think that there may be another problem that (more than one) worshipper probably has with singing this song. ... These beautiful descriptions are not easily grasped with the mind's eye... And perhaps they are not as appealing to the average man or woman today... as they were a half century ago ... People today are not used to identifying with such images. The problem is that metaphors like "ocean" are **abstract** and **impersonal**. Unless a person grew up with the song and has some emotional attachments... these poetic words do not readily impact us... or conjure up a lot of meaning.

What marvelous truth they convey... though! ... So I am not criticizing this song as though we shouldn't sing it. I think that we should... and in fact... I have asked Dianne to play it a few more times in our service today... and lets see if our study in God's Word does not help us all to understand that these words have been true all along – whether or not we have been able to see it **clearly** it in our own life. ... And as for the way that the truth of Christ's deep deep love is communicated... I have some good news. Most people will better understand God's love through more **personal** illustrations expressed in terms of the closest... most intimate relationships of our lives — family relationships! ... And this is exactly what our passage in Luke chapter 15 does for us. ... So it is... indeed... my full hope that we will be able to come back and sing it again with compelling impact... because of our strengthened belief in it.

- PRAY -

Our passage today is a familiar one to many of you... and it concerns itself with another parable... this one... known as "The Prodigal Son." The word *prodigal* means "wasteful"... because the son... certainly had been wasteful. ... but this story should perhaps **better** be called "The Parable of the Loving Father," because (as I want to show you) ... it emphasizes the deep deep love of the father... more than the *sinfulness* of the **son**.

There are **two** sons in this parable... and the father's treatment of **both** sinful sons communicates quite a bit... about the love that our Heavenly Father has for you and I. ... So... I am breaking this message into **two** parts. First we will examine the father's love for the youngest son... and then worship God in response to the truths about God the Father's love for

us... that are expressed by it... And then... part **two** will examine the father's expressed love for the **oldest** son... followed by another response of worship from us. ... So Let's begin part one! Open your Bibles with me to Luke... chapter 15...

Luke 15:11-24

You will remember... if you were with us last week... that **all** of Luke 15 is Jesus' answer to the accusation of the Pharisees in verse 2... that Jesus "receives sinners and eats with them." ... The Pharisees were appalled by this practice of Jesus... so they criticize Him. ... And all the rest of the chapter (the three parables that Christ told) are Jesus' explanation to them of what is **really** happening when He welcomes sinners and eats with them.

1. The first answer in verses 3–7 is that his receiving sinners is like a shepherd who finds a lost sheep and celebrates with all his friends.
2. The second answer in verses 8–10 is that his receiving sinners is like a woman who finds a lost coin and celebrates with all her friends.

He is saying: I welcome sinners because I am the incarnation of God's love pursuing the lost. ... I am the shepherd seeking the sheep. ... I am the woman seeking her coin. ... And this is all a foretaste of the joy that is coming. ... When sinners turn from their sin... and accept my fellowship as the joy of their lives... they have come home to God. ... **And God is glad!**

With today's parable... Christ pours it out even deeper! All three parables have this in common: being lost and being found followed by great joy in heaven.

Last week... when I preached about the first two parables... the emphasis that I took was “Now go and do likewise!” Live incarnationally just as Jesus did... Leave the glories of your comfort zone... go out... be incarnational to people who may not even be like you... and seek the lost...”

Today my aim is **different**. ... Let me tell you right now... what my objective for you **is**... as we study this parable this morning... It is that we would all **Look** at Christ. ... **Consider** Jesus. ... Know what kind of Person it is... you say you **trust**... and **love**... and **worship**... Soak in the shadow of Jesus. ... Saturate your soul with the ways of Jesus... Watch Him... Listen to Him... Stand in awe of Him... Let Him overwhelm you with a love that rolls like an ocean...

In order to do this... lets take a closer look at this parable of Jesus. ... Notice first - how **miserable** the youngest son was.

Luke 15:13-16

It was perfectly legal for the younger son to ask for his share of the estate and even to **sell** it... but it was certainly **not** a very **loving** thing on his part. It was as though he were saying to his father, "I wish you were dead!".

But his father gives him the money and things seem to start well enough for him... but famine came... he squandered all of his resources... and Jesus' explicit description of what happened next... must have made His Jewish hearers **wince**: "*So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that*

country..." (Luke 15:15). ... Literally... this says... he "glued" himself to a Gentile as a servant — a horrible humiliation enough for a Jew. ... He was a day laborer... the very lowest of servants.... But then we read that his master "sent him to his fields to feed pigs" — an unspeakable degradation for a Hebrew — a Jewish swineherder! ... Verse 16 frames the picture: *"He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything."* So there he was amidst a sea of moving snouts and uncaring pigs' eyes.

It is clear that this boy's idea of freedom is that of so **many** people today -- the opportunity to do what you **want** to do. ... You can almost hear what he says to himself, *"Oh, if I could just go where I want to go and do what I want to do, to go and come back as I please, and not have to answer to anyone. If I could just let my passions have their fling and satisfy myself whenever I like and not be under any law or any rules. If I could be my own boss, and answer to no one. What a great life that would be!"*

But... he was rebelling... and no one who is in rebellion... is ever himself. ... He is living in a **dream** world... a world of **fantasy**... **unreality**. ... With this young man... eventually reality breaks through... He takes stock of his life and he discovers that his is chained to his urges. ... His passions have

so developed within him... that he has to satisfy them in **any** way he can.

Yet even when he does so... they are not satisfied.

The picture for us here... is that running away from God **starts** by feeling free... and **ends** in utter misery — either in this life or the one to come... or both. ... When we break our attachment with God... we will end up attached to someone or something else... and that attachment will be slavery... not sonship. ... It may be drugs... or alcohol... or illicit sex... or an employer... or a spouse... or a sport... or a hobby... or a television... or an RV...or books – something ends up owning us. ...

Know this: If we break loose from God... we will be attached to someone or something else... we do not end up being free. In the end...this new attachment will send us to the swine troughs — either in this life or the one to come.

You and I were made to be **filled** with God. And if we run from Him... if we take our little earthly inheritance... whatever God gives us... of time... and money... our talents... and energy... and use it to attach ourselves to **other** things... instead of God... it won't matter whether we are worth nine billion dollars... ...our future will be swine food for all eternity.

That's the misery Jesus describes when we run from the Father's house. The young son... unlike his older brother... recognized the misery he was in... and he repented from it.

Luke 15:17-24

Notice three elements to his repentance.

First... he comes *to himself* (as v. 17 puts it).

When you are alienated from God... you are always alienated from **yourself**. ... You were made **by** God... in the **image** of God... **for** God. These are the three main things about your identity as a human being; you are made **by** God... **like** God... **for** God. ... Repentance is waking up to this truth. ... Whenever a person truly repents... there is a sense of “coming to oneself”... That I was made by God... like God... and for God.

The **second** part of repentance is humble brokenness and a deep sense of unworthiness before God. ... This is what we see the young son do before his father in verse 18: *“I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”*

Lostness is not something we can make excuses for. ...We **are** guilty. We have rebelled against the heavenly Father according to Isaiah 53:6 and Romans 3:23. ... We have known our Father's will... and have **rejected** it.

So repentance is a deep sense of how horribly offensive this is to God... It is the understanding that we have **no** rights before him at all.

The **third** part of repentance is that we cast ourselves on God's free... merciful... bountiful provision of grace. Verse 17:

“How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! I will get up and go to my father.”

Now notice something very carefully here. ... The lost son is willing to come home as a **servant** rather than a son. ... But the focus really isn't how he might oblige his father into compensating him better than what he had been

receiving at the pig troughs. ... What the son is saying is: look at how rich and generous my father is! Even the servants eat well. ... You see ...the focus is on the incredible **bounty** and **generosity** that he has so foolishly traded for the fleeting pleasures of sin.

When we repent... our whole frame of mind... our focus is believing that God is **so** great and **so** good... that the smallest enjoyments of His house... are better than ten thousand worlds without Him.

The son repents fully... and shows us what true repentance looks like. 1) We “come to ourselves” and realize that we were made by God... like God... and for God ... 2) we manifest a humble brokenness and a deep sense of unworthiness before God ... 3) we cast ourselves on God's free... merciful... bountiful provision of grace.

Next we come to the father's response. (This is the crux of the parable.) The father responds with **lavish** enthusiasm.

First... when he saw him far off... he felt immediate compassion. The father was the first to see his son. ... And this depicts God the Father's response when we repent. ... Before anyone else sees... God sees... He sees every tremor of your soul.

Second... he ran out to meet him. ... So... here is this middle-aged man... the owner of a significant estate... with servants at his beck and call. ...There is a certain decorum to maintain. ...There is a dignity. ... Such people do not run. Unless they have thrown all middle-aged decorum to the wind and given themselves over to the utter joy of their hearts.

... .. That's the way God is about your coming home.

Third... he embraced and kissed him. If we lingered over this for just a few moments... and imagined that one person in your life... that you want to come home — home from a sinful lifestyle... home from being estranged... pushed away... or alienated... home from unbelief... home from hard-heartedness — and you are imagining this reunion... what it would be like to see brokenness in their face... and to reach out and embrace them and kiss them... then you would have a glimpse of how God responds to our repentance. We need to know... that God **is** this way. ... God is pure and God is physical. ... He does not hold you at arms length.

Jesus did not have to include these vivid... emotion-laden details. ... But He wants us all to **feel** something here... about the way God welcomes us home.

Here is the lavish welcome of the father - the *best* robe. It was the sign of full... lavish... enthusiastic... unrestrained restoration to the family. That is the way the Father is when **we** come home.

Fourth... he celebrated. ... "*Bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and be merry.*" God is **very glad** when you come home. ...When Jesus receives ... even society's **lowest** citizens... in this case the tax-gatherers and sinners... it is the gladness of the Father gathering in His lost children.

Just try to wrap your mind around this concept. God gets emotional... He is passionate about you...!

(End of Part One)

The parable that Jesus in order to answer the question : “What does it mean that Jesus is eating with tax-gatherers and sinners?” suddenly took a sharp turn. The rest of the parable goes on to answer a **different** question. Next Jesus answers the question: “What does it mean that the Pharisees are NOT eating with them?” ... “What does it mean that the Pharisees are **grumbling** about Jesus' eating with them?” ... That's what this last part of the parable is about.

Until this point in the parable... the scribes and the Pharisees felt confident that they had escaped our Lord's judgment. Jesus had been centering His attention on the publicans and sinners... pictured by the prodigal son. But Jesus continued the story and introduced the elder brother... who is a clear illustration of the scribes and Pharisees. ... The publicans and sinners were guilty of the obvious sins of the flesh... but the Pharisees and scribes were guilty of sins of the spirit. ... Their outward actions may have been blameless... but their inward attitudes were abominable.

But there is also... another intended audience... it isn't just the Scribes and the Pharisees of Jesus' day... that this second part is about. ... As we unpack this... most of us need to listen very carefully. ... You see... this is also a passage for long-time churchgoers. ... This is a passage for people who don't struggle as much with running from God... as they struggle with condemning those who do. ... This is a passage for people who tend to think of **other** people who need this passage. ... *“Oh... you know who I think **really** ought to hear this...?”*

These words go straight to the **heart** of what Christianity is. ... Christianity is a right relationship to God... as our Father... through faith. ...If we get **that** wrong... **all** goes wrong. And it seems that the elder brother got it wrong.

Luke 15:25-32

If I were to ask for a show of hands asking... “How many of you can identify with this older brother...? “*You know... I think he has every right to be angry with his father! He stayed home... he sacrificed... faithfulness ought to be awarded – not a faithless squandering that said ‘I wish you were dead, dad!’*” We would probably have a sizeable number of us who would feel this way. ... We must admit that the elder brother had some virtues that are commendable. ...He worked **hard** and **always** obeyed his father. ...He never brought disgrace either to the home or to the village.

So why is **ir**responsibility commended ... and responsibility ignored...? Isn't this backwards...? Should it be the other way around...? This scene hardly seems fair!

Here is the point that we need to understand from this second part of the parable. I hope this will help you to see what is being **commended** and what is being disaffirmed. It dishonors God to treat Him as a master in need of slave labor. ... What honors God is not slave labor... but childlike faith in his all-sufficiency.

Jesus did not come and hang out a “help-wanted sign.” ... He came and hung out a help-available sign. ... Jesus is eating with sinners because he

is a doctor with a cure... not because he is an employer with a labor shortage.

The Pharisees and scribes couldn't see that... because they themselves had a totally different mindset: "For so many years I have been serving you, and I have never neglected a command of yours."

Test yourself here. If at this point you might say... "It seems to me that the elder brother really has a legitimate complaint." ... You're **not** getting it. You are still thinking in the old way of master and slave and works. Not the Christian way of Father and child and faith. God wants us to have a Father – Son type of a relationship with Him... not a slave/master relationship.

What happens when we try to relate to God that way ... as having a slave to master relationship with Him... ? Everything is distorted.

We are disunited and alienated from the needy and sinners. ...Why? Because we feel intuitively that we have worked hard to stay right with God... and there is no way that those who haven't worked like we have are going to come in here as Johnny-come-latelys and mooch off what is rightfully ours by such long-term... hard... loyal slave labor.

Thinking wrongly about our relation to God like this alienates us from the weak and sinners. It makes us angry and resentful of mercy. Instead of rejoicing with the Father... we pout about our superior merit being overlooked.

It makes us into blamers. Notice verse 30: "When this son of yours came " Not: "When my lost brother came home" but: "This son of yours" There is an ominous ring to this. . . . "This son of yours" is the one that messed up. When we are relating to God as slave to Master on the basis of our hard work, instead of child to Father on the basis of trust and grace, we will be ready even to blame God for the mess-ups in the world. Our whole pattern of thinking and feeling will keep us from grasping the dynamics of grace.

This is what Jesus says to those this morning who have been going to church for decades and have grown hard and merciless and excessively separatistic and who feel disgust more often than they feel compassion.

Now... Let's clue in on the Father's response. Once again... it is the crux of the parable. . . . Notice five simple and gracious things that the Father does to the elder brother:

1. The Father Came out to Him

The father heard inside that his older son is angry and won't come in. . . . One of those horrible family moments... when the whole dinner is about to be ruined... because someone is in a tiff and won't come to the table. . . . Only this is far deeper and far worse. . . . What does the father do? . . . How does he deal with his son? . . . He deals with him the same way he dealt with the younger one. . . . He does not send a servant to get him. . . . He does not holler from a distance and command his son to come into the house. He goes himself. God came into the world to save hypocrites as well as harlots.

2. The Father Entreated Him

Verse 28c: "And his father came out and began entreating him."

The father has every right to be angry... that the elder brother is so selfish and resentful and rude... But...he is not first angry. ... He does not want slavish obedience. ... He is entreating... exhorting... appealing to the son's heart.

Here is the point: the father is not just trying to get the son to perform the right action... he is trying to awaken him to what a father/son relationship of love is like.

3. The Father Calls Him "My Child"

After the son's bitter complaint, the father responds in verse 31, and his first words are all-important: "And he said to him, 'My child.'"

Not: "My servant." ... Or: "My slave." ... But: "My child." ... In the original it is simply, "Child." ... The whole relationship was built on the wrong footing. ... With one word the loving father sets it right: "Child." ... Hear my word: Child. ... This is the relationship we must have... if you are ever to join the banquet.

And what is the essence of that relationship?

4. The Father Says, "You Are Always with Me"

Verse 31: "Son, you are always with me."

With me.... You are a child... I am your father... And you are with me...
With me... With me... ... Here is the deepest void in the elder brother's
heart. ... He lived in the house of the father... and found no satisfaction
from being with the father. ...

There is a strong indication here that this son found no satisfaction from
being with his father. It is found in his ominous words..." *You never gave
me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends.*"

These are the words of person for whom the grace and glory of his father
have ceased to be his treasure. ...They are the words of a person whose
heart is with his friends... outside the family... and who is feeling locked in
to the father's table... when he would really rather be with others.

There are many people in the church today... who have greater treasure
than being with the Father. God may say to them "You are always with
me..." – but it means nothing! ... He is no longer their treasure. ... He is a
means to their treasure. ... And if they could have their party with their
friends... they would take their goat and go.

O how we need to pray that our love would be to God... and not to His
gifts. And wow! Look at the gift He gives to us according to verse 31.

5. The Father Says, "All That Is Mine Is Yours"

"All that is mine is yours" — IF you will stop relating to me as a slave. ... If
you will be satisfied with all I am for you as a Father. ... If you will receive
the grace that I have for you...

Today... won't you begin relating to God as a son or daughter of His...
rather than a slave. ... Then you can start sensing what kind of love He
pours out to you...

*O the deep, deep love of Jesus,
Vast, unmeasured, boundless, free!
Rolling as a mighty ocean
In its fullness over me.*