

# Forgiveness & Restored Relations

*One Another Duties*

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**Bible Text:** Luke 15:11-32; Ephesians 4:32

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## **Ballston Lake Baptist Church**

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I want to begin this morning by reading the entire account of the prodigal son, an account that also could be entitled the compassionate father, the compassionate father eager to forgive and receive back his wayward son. The account is purposed, it seems, to do more than one thing. It is purposed to rebuke, in the language of another, the cold-hearted and self-righteous exclusiveness of the scribes and Pharisees and to show them that in despising Jesus for receiving sinners and eating with them, they were altogether out of harmony with him in whose presence there is joy over the sinner who repents. But I believe dominantly or preeminently, the account of the prodigal son sets before us as the previous two parables in this chapter, the parable concerning the lost sheep and the lost coin, they set before us the heart of God with regard to his welcoming, accepting, forgiving and rejoicing over penitent sinners.

Well, follow now as I read verses 11 through 13, expressive of the sin and the folly of the prodigal, his determination to go his own way to indulge himself, to indulge himself in extravagance and profligacy, to leave his father's house, no more authority, no more wholesome restraints, he can now live for his pleasures, feeding his lusts, doing as he pleased. Verse 11,

11 And He said, "A certain man had two sons. 12 The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' So he divided his wealth between them. 13 And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living.

Now in verses 14 through the first half of 20, we read of the awakening of the prodigal to his sin, an awakening culminating in his penitent confession of his sin against God and his father, and we know theologically that this awakening is something wrought by the Holy Spirit within but the Holy Spirit often uses means, and in this case it was the world beating him up. Verse 14,

14 "Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and attached himself to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed

swine. 16 And he was longing to fill his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him. 17 But when he came to his senses [he was previously morally insane but he comes to his senses], when he came to his senses he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! 18 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."' 20 So he got up and came to his father.

Now in verses 21 to 24, we have a description of the heart and the ways of the father who plainly reflects the heart and the ways of the heavenly Father, that one about whom the Psalmist says, "For thou, Lord, art good and ready to forgive and abundant in lovingkindness to all who call upon thee." That's going to be illustrated now as we read of the heart of a father, a heart full of a disposition to freely, fully, promptly forgive, joyfully concurring the same and joyfully receiving back his penitent son, and again ultimately the picture is of our heavenly Father who has revealed himself in Christ. Verse 20b,

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him

What does that infer? The inference brings to mind a sketch that I remember in my mentor's study of this father with his cupped hand looking, looking down the road to that lost son.

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. 21 And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 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; 23 and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and be merry; 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 be merry.

William Taylor writes of the scene just described as he, the son, draws near to the old home. We can imagine better than describe his feelings. Everything looks just as it did when he left but, oh, the difference in himself, and the remembrance of the life he had been living might for a moment fill his heart with misgivings and make him slacken his pace a little as he asked himself how he would be received, that is, by his offended father. What's he gonna meet with? But before he has had time to answer his inner questionings, he sees a familiar form hastening down the hill to meet him and before he knows, he feels himself enfolded in his father's arms. What a meeting it was. There are no words of upbraiding from the venerable man. He can do nothing but weep out his joy on the neck of his son and the son can only sob his words of penitence, "I have sinned against heaven

and before thee and am no more worthy to be called thy son." But in that warm embrace, he feels himself reinstated as a son.

Now again, brethren, the point of the account is to set out the nature of the heart of God in Christ, God's heart to penitent offenders, and we considered last week forgiving each other just as God in Christ also has forgiven you, dealing with our offenders after the manner of God forgiving us. What's the matter? Here it is, that's the matter. No upbraiding, no self-vindication, but the glad eager, he had to be eager, he's looking, he saw him a long way off, the glad, the eager, whole-hearted acceptance of the penitent offender, joyfully, jubilantly forgiving. Not manifesting a triumphal air over the humbled penitent but freely, gladly, receiving the son back, wiping the slate clean and reinstating him in fellowship. Forgiving each other just as God in Christ also has forgiven you. How? Like the father forgave the prodigal, that's how. And brother, my question is simply this: do we have the grace to be a church of compassionate fathers? The question is not do we have the truth, we have the truth, that's a minor thing compared to the matter of possessing the grace. Do we have the grace to possess and to manifest the heart of the compassionate father to those with whom we have a complaint?

The father graciously, the father gladly, promptly, it seems here he almost interrupted the son before he could get his confession all the way out of his mouth, he conferred upon the penitent son complete forgiveness, accepting and receiving his formerly lost and wayward son, joyfully restoring him to full sonship. And all of these details, the robe and the ring and the sandals and the feast, what do they reveal? They reveal joy. They reveal welcome. They reveal the reinstatement of the penitent offender.

As you know, the parable doesn't end here. There's another figure, there's the older son. The older son and the older brother, taken to be representative of the Pharisees and scribes, he's got a very different heart filled with resentment and anger and ill-feelings. Apparently he does not think he's been treated as he deserves.

25 "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 might 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 entreating him.

James writes that is peaceable, gentle, easy to be entreated, full of mercy. The older son's exactly the opposite. The father came out and began entreating,

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 kid that I might be merry with my friends; 30 but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with harlots, you killed the fattened calf for him.' 31 And he said to

him, 'My child, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 But we had to make merry and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.'"

Now please note to recap, note the following four particulars. The heart of the offended father evidenced in verse 20, "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him." The offended father yearning, solicitously looking for his son. "His father saw him and felt compassion for him." In spite of the son's rebellion, in spite of his folly and miserable condition, there was a yearning heart of compassion ready, it's obvious, ready to be poured out upon that penitent. The readiness to confer forgiveness, longing to receive him back and to restore him, again it's evidenced by the immediacy of the father's response to the prodigal's penitent words, "But the father said to his slaves," again as if he cut him off in midstream, "Quickly bring out." It seems that even before the son had opportunity to complete his confession, the father broke in, he heard enough, he instructed the slaves who observed that scene to gather the tokens of joy and restoration because, "this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found. And they began to be merry."

Brethren, observe the heart of the offended father: large, gracious, forgiving, ready to forgive, eager to confer forgiveness, joyful, welcoming the offender, not stinging him, not vindicating himself, not taunting him, not triumphing over him, ready to have it made right. Don't miss that, but don't miss this either: the penitent confession of the offending son. Again verse 21, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." Discontented with his father's house, wanting to do as he pleased, wantonly squandering his inheritance, yet thankfully he came to his senses. He humbled himself. And having offended his father, he penitently confessed. There was humility. He was willing to be his father's hired man. There was penitent confession. No excuses. No blame-shifting. No mitigation. No pride-sparing language of, "I'm sorry," or "If I sinned," or "I did something inappropriate." No, "I have sinned against heaven and in your sight." Don't miss that.

And again don't miss, thirdly, restoration. Restoration. Joyful acceptance. Reinstatement. The relation with the father restored. The penitent son returned to the place and privileges of sonship before the father.

And don't miss, fourthly, the angry, resentful, self-righteous, older brother who refused to join in the joy of his brother's acceptance and restoration, who would not take part because the older brother had a very different kind of heart.

Now that takes us back to last Lord's day, to forgiving one another and to some matters I intentionally left out. Last Lord's day following the outline, we considered in the first place the face of forgiveness, the features of forgiveness, what does it look like. Well, I could put it simply: it looks like what we just read. That's what it looks like. But more methodically, I answered the question what does it look like by considering relevant language. We considered the language of Ephesians 4:32 and Colossians 3:13 in our primary text, the particular verb there translated in Luke 7 at verse 42, "He graciously

forgave them both." That translation captures the root of the term "grace," and the verb in Ephesians 4:32 and Colossians 3:13 in the middle voice, simply means "to show yourselves gracious" just like the prodigal's father; to show yourselves gracious by readily, generously forgiving just like the prodigal's father.

We considered the language, the most common New Testament language found in Matthew 6:12, Matthew 6:14-15, found in the account of the unmerciful slave, the language that simply means "to let something go." Let it go. Send it away. Cancel the debt. Remit it, that is, the offense. Let it go.

We considered, thirdly, the once used term in the context in Luke 6:37 that is similar to the second though translated "pardon, and you will be pardoned." The term means "to loose something, to release it."

We considered, fourthly, the language of 1 Peter 4:8, "love covers a multitude of sins," throws a veil over them so as to keep from needless exposure and condemnation.

And then we considered 1 Corinthians 13:5, "love does not take into account a wrong suffered," accounting language where something is put out on one side in a ledger so you don't forget it. You've got to have an accurate record as an accountant, and there are some people who are great accounters in terms of wrongs suffered, they don't forget a thing but true forgiveness is not like that, not forgiveness from the heart. Love does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not enter on the debit side of the ledger of the mind and heart so as to retain an exact memory and record so as to have it frequently in view. Love doesn't do that. Forgiveness doesn't do that.

Now we correlated that language and said this, forgiveness then has these features: the feature that is so prominent in the prodigal's father's dealings with his son, the feature of the gracious willingness to readily, freely forgive an offender. That's plainly at the heart and soul of what forgiveness is, plainly from the most commonly used term in the New Testament, repetitiously used, it means letting go. Letting go. It means the passing over of punishment, and as I say that, I omitted the language that Romans 3 we considered that gives us that aspect, passing over punishment. It means covering from needless exposure. It means blotting out the offense so as to be done with it, so as to be done with grudges and bitterness and that angry replaying in the mind over and over.

But there's one more feature now to be added, another feature illustrated by the account of the prodigal son and compassionate father, and the feature I signify is the receiving back to yourself of the offender. That's the culmination. The jubilant acceptance back of the offending brother. The one forgiven is received back into cordial relation, welcomed, accepted, restored. No more cold war, it's over. Doing as the compassionate father did with the penitent prodigal and to further develop this feature, I add the following: this feature of receiving back, clearing the deck of the grudges and the anger and the bitterness at the offenses, is probably bound up in Jesus' words of Matthew 18:15, "And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your

brother." Not winning in the way of triumphing over him, but in the way of a restored relationship that had been ruptured.

It's this feature of forgiveness that is bound up in the instructions of the apostle to the Corinthian church about the scandalous sinner that had been excommunicated. In 2 Corinthians 2:6, "Sufficient for such a one is this punishment which was inflicted by the majority, so that on the contrary you should rather forgive and comfort him, lest somehow such a one be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. Wherefore I urge you to reaffirm your love for him." That's what the compassionate father did for the penitent prodigal. He was reaffirming his loving acceptance of his offending son.

This feature of forgiveness is inferred in the case of Mark, who on the first missionary journey deserted Paul and Barnabas, and yet years later probably 16-17, maybe 18 years later, what do we read? Among the very last words Paul ever wrote that were enscriptured, "Pick up Mark and bring him with you for he is useful to me for service." What do you infer? Things were made right. You have to infer that.

Brethren, this final feature intentionally omitted last week is a prominent feature of how God in Christ has forgiven us. If that's not the case, throw out the doctrine of adoption, of sonship by regeneration, of an eternal inheritance. This is how God forgave us, how God in Christ has forgiven us. Forgiving each other just as God in Christ also has forgiven you. How has he forgiven you and me? He has received us and accepted us and granted us the status and blessings of sonship, "No longer a slave," writes Paul, "but a son, and if a son then an heir through God."

Thus such is a part, a prominent part of forgiving one's brother from your heart. There's acceptance and restoration and I ask again: do we have the grace to so forgive?

Why is forgiveness so hard? Well, there are probably many answers to that bound up in our native depravity, beginning with our pride. Years ago, many years ago, I sat under some instruction that I think helps answer, gives at least one answer to the question, "Why is it so hard?" Yeah, we're proud. Yes, we're selfish. Yes, we're vindictive. But let me offer this: forgiveness is so hard for sinners because if you give it, it may upset the balance of your guilt, the guilt that the offended possesses relative to the anger and the bitterness of heart that the offender now has, perhaps relative to words spoken of or about the one who offended me, and I hope I said this right, the guilt, the one who has been offended, that's what I meant, the guilt that the offended one possesses relative especially to how he's responded to the offense of the offender. Anger, angry words, bitterness, desires to get even, grudges, rudenesses, studied avoidance, and is, as it were, he can balance that guilt as long as he can keep blaming the offender. In his own delusion, he can justify it. His attitudes and his words and his slights and the cold-shoulder and all the other mechanisms of carnal response, he can excuse himself because of the blame he can place on the one who offended him. But what happens if he forgives? If he lets it go? It's all out of balance. If he or she truly forgives, lets go, dismisses the blame, the debt, the sense that the offender is obligated to me, then the one offended must deal with himself

and perhaps needs to seek forgiveness of the very one he just forgave, for he's let go of his justification for his poor attitudes and words and ways.

That upsetting of a balance of guilt and blame, I wonder, I don't know for sure, but recently that's come back from years ago. Is that one of the things that makes forgiveness so hard? When I'm still worked up and viewing the offender as a moral debtor, boy, I can justify my carnality against him, but if I let it go, now I've got to deal with myself.

A church of compassionate fathers jubilantly receiving back one another's who offend, a church of restored relations, there's enough truth here for that, is there enough grace?

Let's pray.

*Father, may we demonstrate that yes is the answer to that last question. Amen.*