

THE PRODIGAL SON AND THE PRODIGAL GOD OF THE KINGDOM

LUKE 15:11-32

REV. CHARLES R. BIGGS

Our passage from Dr. Luke's Gospel this morning is a very familiar parable often known as the story of the Prodigal Son. Jesus teaches a third parable in response to the grumbling of the Pharisees and Scribes about His having table fellowship and receiving tax collectors and sinners to sup with Him and hear about His Kingdom (15:1). These tax collectors and sinners are repentant and desire to know more about the forgiveness found in Jesus and the abundant life that Jesus is offering to all by faith alone.

After Jesus tells the first two parables concerning the lost sheep and the lost coin in 15:1-10, he tells another parable about a man who had two sons, and the younger son becomes a prodigal. What does "prodigal" mean? The word prodigal usually is used as an adjective with one's waste of resources such as one taking his inheritance and being recklessly extravagant. But the word prodigal simply means "abundantly lavish". While the son in our parable is recklessly lavish with his inheritance, it is God and His character that is primarily revealed here in the story and he is abundantly (not recklessly) lavish in his grace toward sinners.

As we approach these parables, let us be reminded of an important purpose of the parables. A purpose of parables is to reveal the character of God; that is, what he is like. A parable reveals the Kingdom, but it also conceals it from those who do not have ears to hear and eyes to see given by God alone (cf. Luke 8:1-15; Matthew 13):

To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables, so that 'seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.' (Luke 8:10).

Professor Joel B. Green points out that there is an escalation in the three parables from chapter 15 considered together; in the first parable, the shepherd loses one sheep out of one hundred; the woman in the second parable loses one coin out of ten; the father in the third parable loses one son out of two (*Luke*, NICNT, pg. 573).

We should also take note that the three parables in chapter 15 gives us different perspectives on repentance: the first two parables reveal the diligent and relentless and thorough seeking of God as he seeks out the lost; the third parable that we will consider this morning shows repentance from the human side of things (although this would never exclude the involvement of God in it!).

And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. ¹³ Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had

and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living.¹⁴ And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need.¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs.¹⁶ And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.¹⁷ "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger!¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'"

²⁰ And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.²¹ And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'²² But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet.²³ And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate.²⁴ For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate.

²⁵ "Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing.²⁶ And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant.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 was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him,²⁹ but he answered his father, 'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends.³⁰ But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!' ³¹ And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.³² It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"

I. Introduction

In our sermon last week we contrasted in more depth the differences between the tax collectors and sinners and the Pharisees and Scribes. Suffice it to say in summary that the tax collectors and sinners were those at the bottom of the social and religious ladder who were most some of the most despised people in the ancient world and by those in the visible covenant people of God in Israel.

While the Pharisees and Scribes were at the top (opposite end) of the religious and social ladder in Israel, very important religiously and politically, and highly respected. The leaders of Israel have been grumbling about Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners for most of his ministry; Dr. Luke first records their reaction when Jesus dined with Levi (Matthew):

^{ESV} Luke 5:29-30: And Levi made him a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them.³⁰ And the Pharisees

and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"

However, in a kind of eschatological reversal, the tax collectors and sinners at the bottom of the ladder are being received as repentant sinners by Jesus and they are hearing him and sitting with him as learning disciples, whereas the Pharisees and Scribes, the ones you would most expect to be sitting and supping with Messiah, are grumbling *at a great distance from Jesus* (v. 2).

We should read this one parable with three different lessons as we view the story from each character's perspective.

II. The Younger Son (15:11-19)- *Tax Collectors and Sinners*

And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. ¹³ Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. ¹⁴ And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! ¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants."'

Kingdom Lesson: God will gladly and with great celebration receive repentant sinners and restore them to himself!

The first son who we are to identify with is like the tax collectors and sinners who are gathered at Jesus' table to hear him tell about the Kingdom (v. 1). Jesus paints a picture to shock the audience. This younger brother and his audacious behavior he speaks of would have raised eyebrows in the ancient culture!

A. "I want my full inheritance now" (v. 12)

In the ancient world (and perhaps even today) to desire one's inheritance before the father had died would be comparative to wishing his father were dead. Inheritances then and now come *after* the Father has died and then because of the grace of the father. It is like him saying: "Dad, I wish you were dead so that I could spend my inheritance (all that you have worked hard to earn) without any interference from you!" The son is literally asking in the Greek for τὸν βίον which means "the life" so that

the son is requesting a portion of his father's life that he will leave him.

The Bible teaches in Deuteronomy 21:17 that the firstborn son was to receive twice the amount that a father would give to each of the other sons, so the son here would have probably received one-third of the property on his father's death. In the Old Testament there are rules about disposing of one's property after death in Numbers 27:8-11; 36:7-9. It was highly irregular to dispose of one's inheritance to a son before one's death, although it did occur.

In the writings of *Sirach* that are dated in the Second Temple Period (after the exile and before and during the time of Christ), there is a warning against fathers passing on property to their children during their lifetime which proves that while it was unlikely and irregular, it was a practice (Beale and Carson, pg. 342):

“To son or wife, to brother or friend, do not give power over yourself, as long as you live; and do not give your property to another, in case you change your mind and must ask for it. While you are still alive and have breath in you, do not let anyone take your place. **For it is better that your children should ask from you than that you should look to the hand of your children...At the time when you end the days of your life, in the hour of death, distribute your inheritance**” (Sirach 33:20-24).

But the father is gracious to the son and grants him his wish.

B. “I want to move away and be my own man” (v. 13)

The son wants to move away from his family and implicitly his commitment to his family. This may not seem as strange today in a modern and very mobile society, but in the ancient world usually 2-3 generations of family stayed together and dwelled together under one roof. They often depended upon one another to carry on the family vocation and work in the community and for all to help one another.

The son may have felt restrained by his family (perhaps too many “dos and don'ts” or not enough freedom to do what he wanted. So the son desired to seek out the world and go his own way.

After the son moved into the “far country” which were unclean Gentile lands (far from the covenant community or visible

church) he lived prodigally, or lavishly extravagant and wasteful in living life like sinners with no covenant privileges or duties to God.

The son's life is described as "reckless living" which is ἀσώτως in Greek and it has the sense of unrestrained sensuality and spendthrift extravagance (Geldenhuys, pg. 411).

So he spent his money on probably everything that he had never had in his father's home, and wasted his money on that which he could never have permission to do in his father's home!

C. "I am in need; I'm out of money and getting hungry" (v. 14)

A "severe famine" occurs in God's sovereignty and because he has squandered his livelihood or wealth, he has nothing left to keep him alive- -his life is in danger and he must turn to begging and a shameful existence.

D. "I am a hireling who feeds pigs" (v. 15)

The most unclean animal to an ancient Jew was a filthy pig or swine (Lev. 11:7; Deut. 14:8; cf. Isa. 65:4). This son whose father was quite wealthy, who once had an inheritance, who once had a family name, who once was someone with a future and with a caring family now is one who feeds pigs.

A more humiliating position would be hard to find in the ancient world (perhaps like the humiliation of one who would have to clean dirty latrines in hot 100 degree weather!?). There was a Rabbinical saying that said: "***Cursed be the man who would breed swine***" (*Baba Kamma* 82b, quoted in Morris, pg. 264). If that were true, then how much more to work with and feed them! This teaches us that the younger brother was desperate for a job and for some food.

You could have heard the son say: "I used to be somebody; don't you know that I haven't always been a pig feeder?!" And others would respond: "Shut up pig feeder- -get back to work- -sure you were something- -so was I- -yea, I used to clean latrines for a living at a palace" and then the uncaring laughs and snorts would start as other pig feeders looked at each other in disgusting disbelief at the person they reckoned thought more highly of himself than he ought.

E. "I am hungry and no one cares for me" (v. 16)

Just when you thought he was low, he sank even lower. Now he is not merely feeding the pigs—He’s desiring to eat with these unclean creatures. In fact, he is not merely desiring to eat with them, but desiring to eat *after them and with them*.

The son has become so hungry that he is willing to eat the pigs’ food (“pods”) which would have been a sweet bean from a carob or locust tree (Bock, pg. 1311- κερατίων means literally “little horn” and was eaten by pigs and only the poorest humans; there was a saying from a Rabbinical writing *Lev. Rab.* Which said: “When the Israelites are reduced to carob pods, then they will repent.”): HUMILIATING!

“But no one gave him anything” (v. 16b): Where are his friends? Surely with all the cash he had when he initially came to the far country he was able to *buy some friendships- -surely someone owed him a favor, and someone cared?!*

He is destitute; even the pigs are doing better than him!

The son has gone far from the family and is now in an unclean land, living among an unclean people, living in an unclean way, with an unclean job, and now the depths of degradation: Becoming just as unclean as all the people around him!

F. “Life used to be great!” (v. 17)

Circumstances of these kind should make all men “come to their senses” or come to themselves (v. 17a), and by God’s grace (implicit here), the young son does come to remember “the good times” and the “good life” that he had at home with his Father *when he came to himself*.

He remembers the place where he should be; he remembers what he once had; he remembers what he could have (perhaps once again).

Here the son realizes that although he sought freedom away from his father where he would have the freedom to do what he wanted to do (thinking that being in his home was cramping his style and that he was too limited to his father’s will), that actually had become enslavement and bondage.

In his realization by God’s grace, he realized that the freedom and joy of life was actual found *with the father* and in his

household where there was love, provision, and everything he could possibly want!

We must always keep in mind that sinning against and doing one's own will is NOT the path to freedom, but to enslavement to sin and all kinds of evil that will end in destruction. Like the younger brother, sinners too try to break away from God their Creator, break the bonds that bind them to his will, and thus become enslaved to the world, the flesh, and the devil (cf. Ephesians 2:1-3).

G. "I will go back home to my Father and confess my sinfulness to him and I will no longer be his son, but a slave (vv. 18-19)

In order to get his life back the son realizes: "I must confess my sinfulness to my father, and I must repent and return, and humbly submit to His judgment *even if it means just merely being his slave rather than his son for the evil things I have done.*"

Notice the son's confession and true repentance revealed here. If he had been merely full of worldly sorrow that can lead one to death (cf. 2 Cor. 6:7ff), *then he would have been merely sorry for what he lost*. He would say something like this to the Father: "Look, you were right, I was wrong, I'm home and that's what matters- -I'm hungry right now and need you to feed me! I didn't enjoy being out there on my own, and so I returned. I didn't have anywhere else to turn, so I came back...Surely you understand all that you have done to cause me to trouble you in this way."

His true and godly repentance is revealed in that he is not merely sorry for what he lost, *but for what he had done in sinning against God and His Father ("heaven" was a way to speak of God to avoid taking his name in vain by the Jews)*. In his confession here, the son says: "I am sorry that I sinned against God and you, my Father- -take me as your slave and let me repay the debt I owe to you."

^{ESV} Luke 15:18-19: I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants."

We should all remember and understand that our sins are against God first and then against our fellow man. True repentance is shown not merely in the reconciliation between two people, but first it is shown toward God if it is real. True or

godly sorrow and repentance will lead one to be rightly reconciled to others, but for true and lasting reconciliation to happen, there must be a repentance toward God for what one has done.

In other words, it would have been possible for the son to return and be received by his father while still being estranged from God for his sins. Jesus specifically says that the younger son realized his sin against God *and man*.

The younger son formerly demanded his portion with self-sufficient pride, but now he is humbled by God's grace, and willing to take the very lowest place in His father's household and to obey the fathers' commands *if his father will receive him back*. The son knows he has sinned and realizes that he should be punished for his sinful actions and behavior.

You can imagine how difficult this must have been to return home with nothing but his shame; nothing but some terrible stories of what he had done; nothing but his repentance and hat in his hand, expecting perhaps only the worse from his father. He could only expect that he might not even be taken back as a slave, but that will be how he tries to get back closer to his father.

He might have thought: "My father will perhaps allow me to be his slave, but I can never expect the same sort of relationship with him that I have had; he will remind me of how sinful I was, and he will tell me how I have embarrassed him and ruined the family name and reputation!"

It is important to remember that in the ancient world, it was likely that by now the father would have "cut him off" completely and with no afterthought would have already completely disowned this embarrassing son. In light of this, the only thing the young son can hope for is that the father doesn't kill him for what he has done or run him off again for his audacity in embarrassing him and the family name, and daring to come back after all he had done in breaking his heart!

The young son thinks: "He'll kill me; he won't forgive me!" "How could he ever forgive me for what I have done?" "How could he ever love and care for me as his own again- -no one could do that- -it is humanly impossible?"

How indeed?

III. The Father's Love (15:20-24)

Kingdom Lesson: *God's love is prodigal, that is it is abundantly lavish, and he desires to restore the repentant and give them all that he has as heirs of His Kingdom!*

²⁰ *And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.*

²¹ *And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'* ²² *But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. ²³ And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. ²⁴ For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate.*

A. The Father said: "I see my poor and lost son returning home" (v. 20a)

The father is not mad, angry, or unforgiving, he feels compassion!

The father is not mad, angry or unforgiving, he runs toward the son and kisses him tenderly showing his love for him! I have always pictured the father in this parable sitting morning and evening on his front porch looking out over his land, hoping and praying that one day his lost son would return home.

B. "I love him and will embrace and kiss him" (v. 20b)

This is truly amazing grace that is in view here. The son had wished that his father was dead; he had taken a large portion of hard-earned money and possessions from his father and squandered them sinfully (he has nothing left; nothing to show but shame for what his father has given to him); the son has made the father worry sick for weeks or months thinking that his son was dead by now.

And the father, rejoicing that his son has come back home, runs to him with a big embracing hug, and tenderly kisses him! As we learned in the previous parables, the Father seeks and saves the lost in Jesus Christ. *In Jesus Christ, all repentant sinners are received, forgiven and restored to God the Father.*

C. "I will fully restore you as my son because of my son's repentance toward me (v. 21-22)

The implicit and important point here is that the father *had given the son his inheritance, but he shall do so again!* The son is once again heir to all the father has!

The father too is a prodigal! That is, the father is lavishly extravagant with his grace to the repentant and restored son!

You will notice in v. 21, the son's rehearsed lines of sorrow before his father get interrupted by His father's lavish desire to bestow his son with the best he has to offer! The son is not able to tell him that he will be a slave for him, because the father gives him no chance in his excitable reception to continue!

But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. -v. 22

The father gives him the best robe in the house which was a sign of position and placed it upon him as if was being invested as a king, or a prince. He puts a ring on his hands, and dresses him fully with shoes.

Men who have fought in lengthy and bloody wars, who go without much food for days, tell of their experiences and uncanny desire they had for shoes (I think of letters written home from soldiers during our American "Civil War" or *War Between the States of 19th Century*). The younger boy has been without shoes in destitution, and the Father places a new pair on his feet. The boy is filthy and dirty, and the Father places his best robe upon him, and implicitly cleans him up!

The son goes from destitution to restoration because of the father's graciousness! From insensitive sinful behavior to investiture as the beloved of the Father!

This is the main point here: The character of God is revealed in that Jesus is at table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners because God loves repentant sinners! When sinners repent, he is glad to receive them and fully restore them!

D. "Let us all celebrate for my restored and resurrected son- - who is alive from the dead- -My son who was lost, but now is found!" (vv. 23-24)

DEAD → ALIVE

LOST → FOUND

REJOICE- -LET'S EAT- -CELEBRATE!

-v. 24

Again, we see the heart of God as a rejoicing God when sinners repent and turn to Jesus Christ by faith alone (cf. 15:7, 10).

One of the amazing aspects of Jesus' parable about the father is how different he is from fathers in the ancient world (as well as today). The father first of all gave to his son all of his inheritance when he asked for it. He also patiently waited and watched lovingly for his son with hopes that he would one day return instead of "cutting him off" and making things easier for him emotionally by just trying to forget that he even has a son.

He runs to his son which was most undignified for a respectable man and head of his household to do in the ancient world. ***And what truly sets him apart from most other fathers as different is his perfect and compassionate mercy and love.***

The father is radically different than we! He kills the fattened calf in his rejoicing and celebrates lavishly that his son is home! The fatted calf in the ancient culture was a specific calf that was set apart for a big celebration (the Father had been saving this one for the right occasion).

If any of you ever think you are too far gone, or too unrighteous, or your past is too radically sinful to be forgiven, then I want you to understand clearly: ***God loves sinners who repents! God will rejoice and celebrate and lavishly and extravagantly dote on you in Jesus Christ!***

God is so radically different and so much more gracious than the best human fathers over their children! God shows that if there is repentance, there will always be his reception and restoration.

In the ancient culture, the son would have been cut off as Teyve with his youngest daughter in the film *Fiddler on the Roof*, but this Father, that is God, has a re-investiture celebration and service in restoring his son to his rightful and privileged place within the family! (See Blomberg, *Preaching the Parables*, pg. 43).

But NOT EVERYONE is happy!

IV. The Older Son (15:25-32)- Pharisees and Scribes (v. 2)

Kingdom Lesson: *Some who are part of the visible covenant people of God may not truly be devout, but really just hypocritical. Not all repent and rejoice when sinners come home because although they seem to believe, they are really just as far in their hearts as the one who just returned (cf. Matt. 15:7ff). None should ever think that God cannot show mercy to even the most scandalous and wicked sinner who repents!*

²⁵ "Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. 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 was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, ²⁹ but he answered his father, 'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!' ³¹ And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"

A. The older son said: "I hear music and dancing; what is this all about?!" (vv. 25-26)

As the Pharisees and Scribes were continuously grumbling about Jesus supping with tax collectors and sinners (15:2, see last sermon for details), so the older son is grumbling about his father's fiasco of forgiveness here!

From the fields as the older son is working, he hears a live band- -some live entertainment that was hired by the father for a special occasion- -and rather than running to enjoy himself, he runs angrily to object!

The older son cannot understand or fathom why his father would show this kind of mercy toward his lost son- -why so much grace?! The older son wants his brother punished as he deserves, but the Father takes the initiative to go to the older brother and encourage mercy, grace, and celebration because of the younger son's repentance and return!

B. "I am so angry about this! I can't believe you would show such grace to my younger sinful brother and celebrate like

this- -when have you celebrated with *me in this way?*” (vv. 29-30)

The older son wants some special recognition for his service in the family; he wants to know why he has been “good” all these years and the father rejoices and celebrates with the “bad” and sinful son!

The older son is so angry that he doesn’t even call the formerly lost son “my brother” but rather calls him “this son of yours” (v. 30) indicating that he wants nothing to do with him and is unforgiving for what he has done.

The older son is angry at the father and he is angry and unforgiving with his younger brother. He considers that he has been “slaving” while the son was having a sinfully good time wasting all that the family had earned and disgracing the family name, while he has been there in the home faithfully, and not receiving even a “thank you” *for all he has done!*

As Professor Geldenhuys commented on the older brother’s anger and the rebuke of the Pharisees and Scribes: “The religion of most of the Pharisees and scribes was essentially one of rigid lack of freedom. It was a severe burden on them and made their lives cheerless, for their obedience to the law of God was constrained and not founded upon sincere love and gratitude towards God” (pg. 413).

As I said last week in part one of this sermon on the three parables of Jesus in Luke 15, the Pharisees and Scribes reveal themselves as unbelievers in this passage (and in many other places (cf. Luke 7:30; 23:21ff).

It would not be biblical or fair to compare these two groups (repentant sinners and hypocritically devout) as those who are different types of believers in Christ’s Church. It is not true that believers can truly be Pharisees and Scribes for then they would be unbelievers. ***But believers can sometimes fall into their Pharisaical way of thinking.***

Believers in Christ’s Church can rely too much on their own righteousness before God and not be thankful for the grace of God that has transformed them in Christ. Believers in Christ’s Church can be overly judgmental and proud about their position in Christ and avoid modern “tax collectors and sinners” for the wrong reasons. They can become angry or unfairly prejudiced

toward them like the older brother when repentant sinners come home and are restored.

[Excursus] The New Testament reveals to us at least four types of people, particularly in Jesus' parables (I am thankful to a conversation I had with Elder Steve Davis about this). I think that it would be helpful to go over these four different types of people in the Gospels as we study and seek to understand Jesus' parables:

1) **Repentant Sinners** (like those who are drawing near to hear Jesus teach as His disciples, 15:1); these sinners were characterized by being far from the covenant and found life in Christ through faith (also like Zacchaeus, Luke 19:1ff).

2) **The Devout** (like those such as Anna, Simeon, Nathaniel, Cornelius) who are by God's grace and Spirit seeking the Kingdom and responding in repentance when Jesus comes, eagerly awaiting Messiah, who have always grown up in the covenant or church community.

3) **Unrepentant Sinners** such as the rich young ruler who although he is told by Jesus to repent, does not obey and many others in the Scriptures who do not find life in Jesus because of their love of sin and refusal to repent.

4) **Hypocritically Devout** (like the Pharisees and Scribes who refuse to repent and thus reject the purpose of God for themselves (Luke 7:29-30)).

These four types of people should be distinguished and understood by us when reading the Gospels so that we do not make the mistake of comparing the Pharisees and Scribes with believers. Believers *can and do* fall into Pharisaical or legalistic mindsets yes, but the Pharisees and Scribes ***are not truly devout***; that is they are not believers, but rather unbelievers and I think that is important when interpreting the parables, especially this one concerning the Prodigal Son.

Again, repentant sinners are those who were far from the covenant who find life and a radical life change (believers); unrepentant sinners find eternal wrath and punishment for sins for their refusal to repent and believe (unbelievers); the devout in Scripture find life and have grown up in a covenant family as a true heir of Abraham that looks for hope in Christ by faith alone (believers); and hypocritically devout like the Pharisees and other Teachers of Israel; these are those who are in the covenant and have great covenant privileges but their hearts are far from God and they worship him in vain (unbelievers; see Matthew 15:1-7).

We should remember that because God is a seeker and a diligent one at that (as we learned in the first two parables of the lost sheep and lost coin, 15:1-10), God seeks thoroughly and relentlessly until his own sinful people come to him.

We should be reminded that because of this merciful character of God that is revealed, NO SINNER IS EVER BEYOND HOPE HERE IN THIS PRESENT WORLD- - THERE IS ALWAYS A HOPE THAT THEY WOULD REPENT AND BE SAVED! There will be a day when unrepentant sinners are judged and God restores the world, but for today, Today is the Day of Salvation (2 Cor. 6:1ff).

- C. **The Father said in response to the older son: “You have always been mine and I am grateful, and all that I own is yours! But your younger brother squandered his inheritance, was sinful and was lost, but now he is found and he has repented- -let us rejoice!” (vv. 31-32)**

The important point of the Father’s character revealed here is that he is willing to receive the repentance of both of his sons.

The father speaks patiently, kindly, and lovingly to the older son as well as to the younger.

The father is willing to receive the older son and restore him from his sins too if he will repent!

This I think is the biggest surprise of the story! While the younger son was a greater distance away in proximity (or miles) from the family squandering the extravagant and lavish love of the father, the older son was just as far away from his father and actually served him in vain, living like a slave under his roof rather than a true son!

Although the older son had remained in the house, his outwardly external devotion was a sham! *He was not as far away in distance perhaps, but was just as far (if not farther away!) in his love for the father.*

As Jesus says to the Pharisees and Scribes elsewhere:

You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: ⁸ “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; ⁹ in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.” - Matthew 15:7-8

“Their heart is far from me...” Sobering!

Jesus teaches here that a person can be outwardly devout, but be *hypocritically devout*- -and in need as just as much repentance and forgiveness as one who is far away from the covenant altogether! Jesus goes on to teach in Matthew 15:

But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. ²⁰ These are what defile a person...”- Matthew 15:18-20.

Jesus is teaching that it is the heart of a person that matters to God. One can be like a Pharisee or Scribe in that they can fake their outward devotion and truly be hypocritical unbelievers, but they are in need of great repentance, too!

And the good news is that God will receive and restore these kinds of “religious” sinners, too!

God will extravagantly and lavishly extend his grace of love on those who are merely outwardly devout and yet have never known the love of God and the grace of God found in Jesus Christ alone!

How will the Pharisees and Scribes respond? Will they too repent of their grumbling (v. 2b) and sup with Jesus *and the repentant tax collectors and sinners as one family*, and find hope and salvation in God’s grace revealed in Christ alone?

Dr. Luke leaves the response open for all. We don’t know how the Pharisees and Scribes reacted to the story immediately. But we do know that eventually they reacted to this story by handing Jesus Christ, the Son of God, over to the Romans to be crucified.

V. Conclusion

Which Son Are You?

Which of the sons do *you most identify with*? You may have been someone who lived recklessly and sinful for some or most of your life- -someone such as Matthew (or Levi) who had once been a tax collector himself (see Luke 5); perhaps you were someone like Zacchaeus who we will learn more about in Luke 19, or the thief on the cross who found hope late in his life.

Perhaps you were like many of the believers at Corinth who had practiced and lived in sexual immoral relationships, engaged in adultery, worshiped idols and practiced a

false religion, succumbed to homosexuality, theft, and blatant blasphemy against God!

But then your Heavenly Father sought you diligently until He found you (15:1-10); you realized that although you had a wicked past, He sought you and graciously found you and lovingly and warmly embraced you in Jesus Christ when you came humbly and with repentance for your sins.

Perhaps you remember the first time hearing of God's grace extended to you in Christ- -and the joy of responding in faith and repentance for the very first time! Perhaps you know and feel the great grace that God showed to you as a sinner who was in desperate need of grace with no hope of salvation apart from Jesus Christ. Perhaps you had never set a foot in a church building and avoided any kind of Christian fellowship that you were invited to!

Now you have found the grace of God in Christ and so you continue to worship and serve Christ and worship God in spirit and truth out of gratitude for what he has done! ***You were dead, but now in Christ you are alive (Eph. 2:4-10); you were lost, but now you are found! Praise be to God.***

But perhaps you do not necessarily identify yourself with the younger son, but with the older. Perhaps you grew up in the church and always served God, and went to worship (even two times each Sunday); you described yourself as a "good person"- - one who never drank, cussed, or committed indecent sexual acts.

Perhaps you were the kind who never would trust those who had those "great testimonies" about being saved from a scandalous life of sin; you might have kind of looked down upon or frowned at those who would get saved and have this overzealous attitude toward God (Sometimes you even prayed privately to God that they would be caged up and not be so overly emotional about God's love in Christ ☺).

Perhaps you thought that God was unnecessarily kind with repentant sinners, while you had been serving God for many years without any kind of gratitude from God or others in your imagination! Perhaps you can remember that when you would serve God you would get so angry inside when no one recognized you for the faithful service that you showed to God all of your life (Perhaps the new converts who were far from the covenant were getting all the attention and putting your service to shame in their zeal?!).

Perhaps you also came to realize that you needed to repent as well as other sinners! Perhaps you realized that you were someone who was angry at God and unforgiving toward your fellow brethren in Christ *even though you seemed a respectable, religious and godly person who was a member of Christ's Church.* Perhaps you realized that your faith was a sham- -there was no joy or love in your heart for God or for the lost- -and you repented too!

Now you have found the grace of God in Christ and so you continue to worship and serve Christ and worship God in spirit and truth out of gratitude for what he has done for all believers *and even for you!* You too were dead, and now are alive; you too were lost (although not as far away in distance), but now you too are found! Praise be to God!

Regardless of which of the two sons you mostly identify with, you should focus most on the God that is revealed here! Here is the God of all grace who receives and restores lost sinners who repent.

That is the most important thing to take away from this perhaps: God is a forgiving God and will receive and restore you to fellowship with him when you repent and turn to Christ. Remember from our sermon last week, we considered the Westminster Confession of Faith's excellent definition of repentance which was:

WLC 76 What is repentance unto life? A. Repentance unto life is a saving grace,(1) wrought in the heart of a sinner by the Spirit(2) and word of God,(3) whereby out of the sight and sense, not only of the danger,(4) but also of the filthiness and odiousness of his sins,(5) and upon the apprehension of God's mercy in Christ to such as are penitent,(6) he so grieves for(7) and hates his sins,(8) as that he turns from them all to God,(9) purposing and endeavouring constantly to walk with him in all the ways of new obedience.(10) (1)2 Tim. 2:25 (2)Zech. 12:10 (3)Acts 11:18,20,21 (4)Ezek. 18:28,30,32; Luke 15:17,18; Hos. 2:6,7 (5)Ezek. 36:31; Isa. 30:22 (6)Joel 2:12,13 (7)Jer. 31:18,19 (8)2 Cor. 7:11 (9)Acts 26:18; Ezek. 14:6; 1 Kings 8:47,48 (10)Ps. 119:6,59,128; Luke 1:6; 2 Kings 23:25

Now as we live, let us be reminded that God has loved us in Christ from the foundation of the world (Eph. 2:1-10). He has given us his Spirit and seated us with Christ in the Heavenly Places as adopted sons and heirs. By grace we have been saved through faith, and this is not of works but a gift from God, so that no one can boast! We are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared beforehand for us to walk in them! Rejoice in the Lord and His mercy and grace that is revealed here!

And whether you identify with the younger son or the older son, remember that repentance is a daily turning from our sins to God. Your sinful tendencies might be those like the younger son could have experienced even after he turned back to his father; when certain sinful thoughts and behaviors you have practiced begin to rear themselves, repent and turn back to God.

Your sinful tendencies might be more like the older brother experienced, and so then your sins will tend toward more religious in nature. You might be more tempted to be involved in outward formalism and externalism and oftentimes turn to your own good works for confidence before God. You too, when you realize that you are falling back into these sins, repent and turn to God and find your righteousness and hope in Jesus Christ alone.

This is just to say that our whole lives should be spent in daily repentance as we learn more of God's grace, the depth of our sins before him, and the grace held out to us in Jesus Christ!

Whether we are more like the younger son or the older son, our Great God and Compassionate Father is found in Jesus Christ, and he is seeking and saving the lost. Jesus Christ will sup with repentant sinners who come to him by faith and receive his righteousness alone!

How do we get "home"? By trusting in Christ alone for our righteousness before God and realizing in his life, death, resurrection and ascension that Jesus was making a way home for repentant sinners. Jesus himself says that he is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, NO ONE comes to the Father except through me! (John 14:6).

Have you found your way home in Jesus Christ? Repent! In Jesus, you will find the forgiveness of sins and restoration to God.

Thanks be to God for His grace; thanks be to God for His Word; thanks be to God for his Christ!

CRB

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