

¹All the tax collectors and sinners were coming to Jesus to hear him. ²But the Pharisees and the experts in the law were complaining, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

³He told them this parable:

¹¹Jesus said, “A certain man had two sons. ¹²The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them. ¹³Not many days later, the younger son gathered together all that he had and traveled to a distant country. There he wasted his wealth with reckless living. ¹⁴After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵He went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶He would have liked to fill his stomach with the carob pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

¹⁷“When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, and I am dying from hunger! ¹⁸I will get up, go to my father, and tell him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.’”

²⁰He got up and went to his father.

“While he was still far away, his father saw him and was filled with compassion. He ran, hugged his son, and kissed him. ²¹The 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 servants, ‘Quick, bring out the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let us eat and celebrate, ²⁴because this son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found.’ Then they began to celebrate.

²⁵“His older son was in the field. As he approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the servants and asked what was going on. ²⁷The servant told him, ‘Your brother is here! Your father killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸The older brother was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him.

²⁹“He answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I've been serving you, and I never disobeyed your command, but you never gave me even a young goat so that I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours arrived after wasting your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’

³¹“The father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. ³²But it was fitting to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found.’”

It's probably the most well-known parable of Jesus, up there with the Good Samaritan. People know Jesus' story of the Prodigal Son. In fact, one of the most beloved hymns bases part of its text on the story: “Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.” The story is beautiful, because Jesus uses it to show the heart of the gospel. But at the same time, Jesus uses it to show us that at any given time, we struggle with the Father's grace.

The story begins with two sons and a father. The father must be fairly well-to-do. He's got hired servants that are on his payroll. One day, the younger of his sons comes to him with a request: “Father, give me my share of the estate.” Now, it doesn't seem like the son has any manners as he demands from his father what his father has toiled to earn. He sounds like a spoiled brat. Of course, the father loves his son, so he gives his son what he's requested. Immediately, the son packs his bags and gets ready to leave. There are no words of gratitude, showing he loves his father's wealth more than his father.

How would you feel being the father? You've bent over backwards for your son. You've made sure he's well-fed and always has a roof overhead. And this is how he treats you? He takes half of your money and then

leaves? Maybe some of you have felt this way with your own kids. Unappreciated. Unloved. Used. When his son walks out the door, this father must be hurting.

The son takes the money and goes someplace far away, and there he chases all the pleasures of life. Jesus doesn't tell us exactly what he does but instead leaves it to our imaginations. Of course, it doesn't take long before all the early inheritance is spent. And in the worst timing, his bankruptcy coincides with a major famine. Not only is the son poor. He's destitute. He finds a job slopping the pigs, bringing the food into the pen and taking the poop out. But the job doesn't pay well. How can we tell? He's jealous of the pigs. He wishes he could afford to eat their food. Smelly and poor, his life is in shambles, and he's not too deluded to see that his poor decisions are the cause of it.

Then he comes to his senses. He remembers how good things were back home. His dad was much more generous to his servants than the son's master has been to him. He decides to go home, and he rehearses the speech he will give to his father: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants." You can see the change in the son, can't you? He doesn't plan to go home and try to wrap his dad around his finger. He has no intention of emotional manipulation. He's sorry for what he's done, and he just wants his dad to bring him on as part of the help.

Homeward bound he travels, unbathed, full of the sweat of travel and the pig feces he's come to know intimately. And as he comes down the street toward the farm, his father sees him. It's almost as if he's never taken his eyes off the road since his son left, hoping that his little boy would someday come home. The father runs down the driveway. His joints are old and achy, but his joy is blocking all the pain. His arms embrace his stinky son. His lips kiss the forehead that tastes of manure.

The son begins his speech: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But that's the only part of the speech he can get through. The father cuts him off. He tells the servants: "Quick, bring out the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let us eat and celebrate, because this son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found."

I want you to look at the first few verses included in the Gospel lesson today. Jesus tells this parable in response to the Pharisees critiquing the company Jesus keeps: "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." That was the accusation against him. So, in Jesus' parable, he is speaking about the sinners he's eating with.

Tax collectors and prostitutes. Those rejected by society, often because they are living sinful lives. These are the people Jesus spends his time with. So, does he condone their behavior? Is he accepting of the things they've done? Of course not, and anyone claiming otherwise looks at Jesus not as a Savior from sin, death, and hell, but as an enabler of sin which leads to death and hell. Jesus is not there to tell the tax collectors to keep robbing their neighbors. He is not there to instruct the prostitutes to keep turning tricks. He is there to call people to repentance. And the people ready to repent are often those whose sins have taken a major toll on their lives. God's forgiveness is for the worst of sinners. No one is beyond his grace. The father welcomes his sinful and rebellious son home with empty arms. Yes, God's forgiveness is for the worst of sinners, even for you and me.

No, you may not be a prostitute, an abuser, or a killer, but that doesn't stop the devil's lies from taking hold, those lies that convince you that you are beyond forgiveness, that you should not go to God in sorrow over sin, but hide yourself from God's wrath. How wrong the deceiver is! Do not listen to the lies he whispers to your heart. Hear Jesus' parable. Look at the way God welcomes sinners home in repentance and absolution. Look

how he takes the dead and makes them alive, how he seeks the lost and makes them found. That's you and me, friends. And there is celebrating in heaven every time we receive the Father's warm embrace.

We are certainly like the younger brother when we wander down the path of sin and need to be led home. But we are also like the older brother too. This brother does not ask his father for his share of the estate. He continues working for his dad, even as his brother runs off to live for himself. But one night, at the end of his shift, he hears music and dancing. Upon hearing that this party is to celebrate the return of his irresponsible brother, he refuses to go inside to the party in protest against what his reckless brother has done to the family. As I read this parable, I have a hard time blaming him. One brother is selfish. The other is loyal.

The father comes outside to reason with his son. The older son says, "Look, these many years I've been serving you, and I never disobeyed your command, but you never gave me even a young goat so that I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours arrived after wasting your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!" Then the father says, "Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. But it was fitting to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found."

While we may take the side of the older brother against the younger, we have to admit that the older brother's priorities are also out of whack. Does the older son love his father? Or, does he love his father's stuff? Sure, he's had his father's affection and care all these years, but now his brother is home, and he is worried that's going to affect his stake in the family business. It's unfair, utterly unfair! And his father is the perpetrator of this unfairness. But the father's explanation shows the biggest problem for the older son. He has not lost anything in having his brother return home. What he's angry about is that his undeserving brother will be gaining from this homecoming.

Jesus uses this parable to first show that forgiveness is freely given with no strings attached. But the second part speaks to the heart of the Pharisees. Yes, the tax collectors, prostitutes, and other sinners were on the wrong side of God because of their obvious sins, but these religious leaders were on the wrong side because of their not-so-obvious sins. They lived life dividing society into two groups: the forgivable and the unforgivable. Certainly, they themselves were in the forgivable group. They had pure hearts. They had focused their lives on serving God. God would no-doubt forgive them for the few times they had transgressed his law. They were just too faithful for him not to. But those who stood on the other side of the line had gone too far with their debauchery and antagonism. They clearly did not love God, so how could he show them even an ounce of mercy?

Let's not pretend that we don't fall into the same mindset of these Pharisees. We divide people into the categories of righteous and unrighteous. We assume God would have more patience with the righteous. But those we deem unrighteous? Well, maybe God should not be forgiving those people.

But I'll let you in on a little secret. It's the secret Jesus is trying to get across here. None of us deserves forgiveness. None of us makes it easier or harder for God to forgive us. We are all sinful, and whether your sin leads even to another person's death or whether it really only affects your relationship with God, the same hell is earned by all of us. And yet, the same price was paid by God for each sin. Christ shed his blood to forgive all our sins, the ones we deem big and the ones we deem small.

Never forget that God's grace is for you. And you'll never be too far away from him to come home. He will welcome you with open arms and full forgiveness. And as you look at those around you, you'll also see sinners saved by grace just as you are, no more and no less. And if there is no sin too big for God to forgive, what should we do? Amen.