

Luk15:11-32: God's love is undeserved: accept it as a gift.

Meditations on the parables #5

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Luk15:11-32: The Parable of the Prodigal Son

(focus on vs. 28-32)

Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons.¹² The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need.¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs.¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.'

So he got up and went to his father.

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate.²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing.²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on.²⁷ 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him.²⁹ But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders.

Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends.³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!

'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.³² But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

Have you ever been to a party or celebration and noticed someone with a long face? The frown on the person's face reveals his discontent and or even his anger. His attitude spoils the party for everyone who becomes aware of him.

The conclusion of the parable of the Prodigal Son shows what the parable is really about.

Of course the parable is first of all a great illustration of the power of forgiveness and the depth of God's love. The younger son broke his father's heart and messed up his life; but when he finally came to his senses and returned to his father he did not come up with excuses. His father did not blame him but accepted his wayward son with open arms.

You can learn what true repentance is, and you learn about the love of God, that he forgives sinners and calls them his children.

The Dutch painter Rembrandt has expressed this masterfully in his painting 'the Prodigal Son'. It is exhibited at the Hermitage in St. Petersburg. When the priest Henri Nouwen saw the painting it impressed him so much that he meditated on the parable and the painting for a long time and wrote a book on it. The painting graces the book's cover.

In the painting, the father embraces the younger son. Light radiates from the father through his arms to the son. The painter has captured God's mercy masterfully by playing with light and dark.

Then you notice another figure on the side. Light partly falls on him, too. But his attitude expresses distance. Hands clasped, standing three feet away from both his father and his brother, he literally distances himself from the father's mercy. He does not participate in the joy about his brother's return.

Why does the parable have to end with the older son? He spoils the whole thing. Don't you wish he wasn't there and that the parable had ended with verse 24?

You may feel like you were listening to a beautiful symphony and suddenly one instrument begins playing out of tune and messes up the final chord. Awful!

The first verses of this chapter give us the setting of the three parables: the religious leaders criticized Jesus for being in the company of sinners.

They could not stand it that Jesus would eat with those people, which meant that he accepted them. Jesus had come to bring God's forgiveness to lost sinners. The Pharisees, however, could not accept that sinners were the first ones to receive God's grace and mercy. They were convinced that salvation was for the righteous, not for sinners who had rejected God with their offending lifestyle.

These three parables are an answer to the charge against him. They speak about how God seeks the lost and rejoices over their return to him. He wants all believers to share in that joy.

This third parable has the same theme as the parables of the lost coin and the lost sheep: God seeks the lost and rejoices when they return to him.

Jesus now takes the time to paint the whole picture. The misery of the younger son comes out clearly. The patience, mercy, and joy of the father shine brightly. The confrontation with the older son brings not only the parable but the whole chapter to a conclusion.

The Jewish leaders are like the older son who refuses to come inside and welcome his brother home.

After hearing the beautiful story of the father's love for his son who insulted him and wasted his property, we meet the older son. He was in the field, working. When he returns home from a long day of work, he hears music and dancing. He summons one of the servants and finds out that his brother has returned and that the feast is in his honor.

Maybe you are surprised about his response: he became angry and refused to go in. What is wrong with him?

His response reveals two things: his ingratitude towards his father and his resentment towards his brother.

"Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!"

Listen to his attitude towards his brother: when he says 'This son of yours', you would not even think that he is talking about his own brother.

That rascal, who blew his share of the inheritance on bad company and a frivolous lifestyle - he wants nothing to do with him. He himself had always been loyal to his father and taken care of the business.

He also takes his anger out on his father. The father's mercy triggers his resentment for his brother. How can his father celebrate after his lousy son wasted his fortune? This is unbelievable! He does not deserve to be welcomed like this!

This is what is wrong with his thinking: he thinks the love of his father is something you deserve. According to him his younger brother should not be allowed to return as his son any more. He does not deserve to be reinstated and received by his father after what he has done.

His thinking is reward-driven. He had stayed and worked faithfully, slaved all these years. If anyone deserved a celebration it was him and not his brother!

The older son is an illustration of the position many church members are in. They don't rebel against God and leave him; they don't commit flagrant sins, but serve him diligently. Jesus warns us that you can do this with the wrong attitude. Even if you never run away from God you can serve him for the wrong reason: the older son had not lived as a son but as a slave. He did not work on his father's farm because he loved him. He expected a reward for his services, and he wanted to party with his friends, not with his father and brother.

There is not one rebellious son but there are two. The younger one had openly rebelled but had returned in repentance. The older one rejected the father's love just as much, but he did not show it; he despised him in his heart. He looked at his father as an employer and harbored resentment against him because of his love for his younger son. He was dissatisfied and angry, and felt he did not get what he deserved.

By telling this parable Jesus exposes ungodly motives in the hearts of the Jewish leaders, which may also be in our hearts. Thinking in terms of a reward makes us reject God's love; it kills the joy of living with God and causes indifference toward the conversion of others sinners.

The Jewish leaders despised the sinners who were in fact their fellow-citizens, their brothers and sisters. They denied them entrance to God's house, even though they repented as God had commanded them in the Old Testament.

This parable shows us Jesus as the father who loves both sons and wants them to remain part of the family. This family is built on love. Jesus welcomes sinners with mercy and forgiveness. Other believers should rejoice that the lost ones had been found and the dead ones had come back to life.

However, pride leads to rejecting God's love and despising your brothers and sisters who repent after they have sinned. The older brother refused to enter his father's house and to share in the joy about lost sinners who had been found.

Do you live as a son or daughter in God's house and live by his love only? Or do you look at yourself as an employee who deserves a reward?

The thinking of the older son can creep into our hearts like this: 'I have been faithful for such a long time. People can count on me. I am one of the pillars of the church. Shouldn't God be pleased with me, even a little bit?'

You look at your life and realize how many sacrifices you have made for the Lord. When you compare yourself to others, you may think 'Why don't I receive what they have? Is this all I get?' Such an attitude leaves you feeling empty and dissatisfied. You don't get what you think you deserve.

It makes you look at others in the church differently, as well.

When you know about someone's sin, do you suddenly look at them with different eyes?

If someone repents from their sin, how do you respond? Do you make them feel that they don't really deserve to be part of the church and that it will take a while before they can be fully accepted? Or are you excited that they have left their wrong ways and returned to the Lord?

Jesus corrects these thoughts and feelings by teaching us what God's love is really like. A proper grasp of God's love is the only remedy against this wrong way of thinking.

The father's response in the parable is telling. For the second time he goes out of his way, now for his older son. According to the culture the son should have shown his father respect and come to him. But the father comes outside and meets his son. His love goes out to his older son as well. He wants him to share in the joy and receive his love.

Listen to his words: "My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours."

The father assures him that he is his son, not an employee or a servant. After the younger son had received his share of the inheritance, the older son's share had remained. Everything that was left was indeed his property!

This is how we relate to God. He has fully accepted us in his house and everything he has is yours. We should no longer try to deserve anything. The love of God the Father is clear in our adoption as sons and daughters for Jesus' sake. He has not spared his only son, now he will not withhold anything from us. We are his children and we can count on his love.

Jesus calls even the Jewish leaders to share in his love, since they had received God's promises, too. Even though they did not believe in him and tried to kill him he continues pleading with them, like the father who invited his older son to come in and share in the joy.

This is the choice and the calling Jesus leaves us with in this parable: how do you respond to his love?