

God's Heart for Sinners

(Luke 15:11-32)

(The Prodigal Son)

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Ninth Sunday after Trinity

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Introduction (1-3)

What is God really like, not just what we think, but what is He like regarding us sinners? Does He want to whack us regarding our sins? What if we have it really good, being raised in a Christian home, and then we blow it? What then?

This story is one of three parables answering verses 1-3 of Luke 15, where the Lord is illustrating God's compassion for sinners.

¹ Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him to hear Him. ² And the Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, "This Man receives sinners and eats with them." ³ So He spoke this parable to them (Luke 15:1-3).

The Lord is **not saying** here that there are people who need no repentance but that they **think** they don't need repentance. We have here the Lost Sheep (vv1-7), the Lost Coin (8-10), and the Lost Son (11-32), commonly called the Prodigal Son. Unlike most of the Lord's parables, this one does not convey only one point but **three**: (1) the heart of the wasteful

¹ I use bold, colors, and underlining to help me preach. This is not my normal way to write.

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son, revealing the lost, (2) the heart of the father, revealing God, and (3) the heart of the elder brother, revealing too often church people.

We have here the prince of parables from the master story teller, the Gospel within a Gospel, a mirror of the soul of man apart from God, and a revelation of God's heart in the presence of repentance. Just as the rose needs no essay to show that it is a rose, so this parable needs no words to demonstrate the majesty of its prose. Like a rose, it carries within itself its own majesty and beauty.

This parable is simple in its story but sublime in its subject, majestic in its thought but mysterious with grace we cannot comprehend, laden with the despicable sin of man but elevated with greater soft heartedness of God. Indeed, sin and grace confront each other, and grace overcomes. We see that the only unpardonable sin is the one not repented of.

Words fail us in this story that illustrates the mercy of God toward us sinners. How can one find words for us to feel the impact of such mercy and grace. I've thought about this story over the years. What does one say? **It seems too good to be true.** Perhaps the best thing is just to begin with the sinfulness and selfishness of the son **who wanted all now**, for we cannot begin to understand the grace of the passionate father until we understand the depravity of the prodigal son.

I. The Prodigal Son (11-19)

Let us consider the characteristics of the prodigal son.

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First, consider what the prodigal son asked for. We better be careful what we ask God for as He may give it to us, such as a lot of money:

And He gave them their request, but sent leanness into their soul (Ps 106:15).

In this parable, we have a young man following the natural bent of his own heart, one given over to the lust of the flesh. He wants enough money so that he can give full vent to his lusts for riotous living without restraint, without accountability. Moreover, we have here the mind and orientation that we are all born with, given to the **world**, the **flesh**, and the **devil**, wanting money for self-interest sake, and yet not the money itself to help others as what it can allow us to do: sin with seemingly impunity.

Second immoral characteristic of the prodigal son was that he had no sense of payday coming for his sins but only enjoyment, giving himself over to them. But as my pastor preached over 1,000 times, there is a "Pay Day Some Day," so every generation has to learn the lesson again, and not necessarily as a young man. As long as we have breath, there is hope for repentance. **The devil's lure works every generation**, for the bait of the world and the flesh are ever enticing and inviting, pleasing to the eyes, and we think that we can be God to choose what we wish without consequences, but **we choose NOT to see** the hook that is covered in the bait that Satan offers. In Gal 6:7, Paul says: "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap." Make no mistake, sin always produces a harvest. And the **harvest reaped is more than what was sown**, it destroys the one who sowed it, and allows no exceptions. If

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one sows to the flesh, he shall reap corruption (Gal 5). This the prodigal son did, and found himself at the bottom. If one lives only for things, only for worldly pleasure, only for himself and this life, his later life is empty, for “one’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses” (Luke 12:15). Indeed, the **things will possess him**.

The judgment of sin is always sin itself, more sin, degradation, defilement, feeling dirty, and destruction. Sin is like **quicksand**: the more and harder you wallow in it, the quicker and deeper you sink.

Sin has a **domino** effect: the sin we thought we were incapable of committing because it was so disgusting will be what we enjoy once we have compromised our consciences by the numbing effect of lesser sins that allows us to commit greater sins. One sin anesthetizes us to commit a more heinous one, until we are at the bottom of the barrel—but there really is no bottom. This is what happened to the prodigal son; he sinned himself into such degradation that not only did he **as a Jew feed pigs**—which was an abomination for Jews—**but he even wanted to eat with them!** He was on skid row, as we say. **Sin itself**—besides the Last Day judgment of God—destroys us, dissipating our bodies, depraving our minds, destroying our relationships, and disfiguring our souls until we are horrible beings to be around, to look at, and everything that was pure and holy that we once cherished is gone. We have filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6-7) **on** us and vile passions **in** us.

This is God’s world, and we cannot sin with impunity. The only ethic that exists is His, and the one who rebels

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against Him will reap consequences **both** now **and** at the Last Day. The prodigal son chose to ignore this.

Prodigal sons have no pleasure in the things of God, but have given themselves over to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season (Heb 11:25), whose **god is their belly** and whose **glory is their shame** (Phil 3:19). They always have a famine within and often poverty without.

We think that because judgment is not immediate that there is no judgment:

Because the sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil" (Eccl 8:11).

BUT the **worst judgment is often the slow one** that boils us in the water like the **proverbial frog** who never jumped out of the water because the temperature only increased in such slow increments that he got used to it at each new degree, slowly cooking.

Third immoral characteristic of the prodigal son was that he **had no self-understanding**. The worst ignorance in the world is self-ignorance. **Self-deception** is very much part of who we are, especially outside of Christ but even for Christians. People convince themselves that they can sin and not suffer for it. The **mafia** person thinks that he can get ahead by destroying rather than by serving. Yet he suffers in his/her person life, in his personality, in his relationships, and often in his body. ("There is no peace, says my God, to the wicked," Isaiah 57:21.)

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The **new rock star** is self-deceived who suddenly comes into fortune and fame, thinking he/she can experiment with drugs, immoralities of the Seventh Commandment (adulteries and downhill from there), alcohol, and not get burned, that he can walk away at any time. But the fortune becomes famine, both in dollars and in the soul, and the fame becomes a farce as fickle fans reject them as quickly as they had accepted them.

The **drunk** is self-deceived in thinking he/she has power over the sin, and will prove it by taking one more drink.

The **serial murderer** just enjoys his sin, or else blames the acts of others for them.

At every point the person suppresses the truth, wanting to believe a lie about himself, about God, and about the consequences of sin.

And those who do become “self-made” people – not that there really is any such thing – only store up many goods over a lifetime to leave them to someone else. Life is utterly futile without the triune God, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and it is meant to be that way.

Fourth and a most excellent characteristic of the prodigal son, consider that the most inconceivable thing happened: the prodigal son “**came to himself**.” Beyond all hope, he came to self-understanding, condemned himself, realized his dissipated life, did not try to cover it over. The ruin of most souls is that they do not think about themselves, their lives, or their sins. One cannot come to grace until he comes to himself. We live in an age of noise to drown out one’s conscience. People can’t live without some kind of music or noise. More-

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over, they justify their every action to themselves and to others. They think a reason given to themselves for their sins will be acceptable to God. They are full of arrogance, hatred of God, and of people. They curse God because they are not rich or not well off, and then wallow in wickedness if He gives them riches.

But the prodigal son “**comes to himself**,” which means he is repenting, acknowledging his sins, making no excuse for them. Have you ever seen someone who will never admit any wrong doing, but when he is finally forced to admit an occasional sin, he always makes an excuse? It was circumstances, it was the other person, someone made me do it, it just wasn't my fault. When I taught junior high school and I would catch someone doing something wrong, such as talking, I would invariably get: “But I was **just** asking him a question.” My response usually was: “Thank you for admitting that you violated the rule. Now here is the punishment.”

The prodigal son is resolving to repent so he prepares to go to his father and even rehearses what he will say. He is turning to God with true repentance and faith. His repentance is seen in his recognition of his sinful condition, and his faith is revealed in his father's goodness to receive him. We see this in his resolve **to do** something about his state, not just to moan about it. He says that when he goes to his father that he will acknowledge that he has sinned against God and man. He does not want to be a son, just a hired servant, for he has already spent his third of the inheritance and does not want to compromise the elder brother's two thirds. (The eldest son received two-thirds of the inheritance to take care of the aging parents.)

II. The Gracious Father (20-24)

Yet, in spite of all the above sins, self-deception, personal destruction, and broken lives, **there is a way back**: Self-knowledge, self-recognition of what one is apart from God, self-confession of ones sins to God and to the ones we have injured, and above all, coming to God through Christ!

Though we can be restored to God, the time we've lost in wandering is forever gone, the hurt to our bodies may never be healed, the money we've squandered may not be recovered, the people we've hurt may be dead or moved on. Indeed, sin is always destructive, ALWAYS, and the temporal consequences may never be mended. The forgiven homosexual with AIDS may still die, yet we accept him as a brother in Christ, for God accepts him. **BUT** one can have forgiveness with God, can begin a new life in Christ that God will bless, and He may just reverse much of our past, wasted lives. The time to begin anew is now, not wasting anymore time.

The response of the Father is what is difficult to describe, for we have here the deep grace and mercy of God in Christ. Here is one of His creatures who has scorned Him, squandered the gifts He gave to Him, wanted to convince others to do the same to enjoy their dissipation, and wanted to have nothing to do with righteousness. Can one sink lower than the prodigal son? Perhaps not—and that is the point! **It matters not what sins are in the past, it only matters what grace is in the present. It matters not what arrogance we had, it only matters what repentance we have.** What sin is too deep for God to forgive? It has not yet been invented. Remember Charles Manson? There was one who committed

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the murders with him who now has his own web site, teaching others of the grace of God, though he will remain in prison the rest of his life.

Yet notice the heart of the Father! When he was still a great distance off, his father saw and recognized him. **The Father must have been looking for him!** The prodigal son did not get the chance to say all that he had intended, for his father was all over him with love and grace. Notice what the father did, who is representative of God the Father:

- He had compassion on him
- He ran to him
- He fell on his neck
- He kissed him

This is God doing this! And He is doing this after all that the son had done against him, in squandering His wealth!

It would seem that to add anything to these words would make them trite, for they tell it all. God's **grace** is lavished on a repentant sinner, but the one who is self-righteous, self-justifying, will be **judged**.

Notice how complete, full, and immediate is the pardon:

- Bring out the best robe that he might be clothed in the family's righteousness.
- Put a ring on his finger to restore his authority to sonship.
- Put sandals on his feet so he can walk with dignity and not as a slave but as a son.

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- Kill the fatted calf for fellowship and celebration, even as we shall celebrate our Father's meal in Holy Communion in a few minutes.

What bars us from the grace of Holy Communion is unconfessed sin, sin not repented of, but not sin itself. Holy Communion should never become a meaningless ritual. If it does, we are like the prodigal son, taking God's grace for granted.

The father concludes: "For this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found," speaking both physically and spiritually. **INDEED**, we must be as accepting of other sinners as God the Father is!

III. The Ungrateful Brother (25-32)

The self-righteous brother, **who represents the Pharisees and I'm afraid, too often, us**, is envious, thinking that such gifts should not be wasted on such a one. How unkind and rough are the feelings of self-righteous people towards sinners! They thank God that they are not like others (Luke 18:9ff). We must not be like this elder brother, and think that those lousy sinners outside the faith are not worthy of God's mercy, like we are allegedly worthy. The homosexuals, prostitutes, liars, and so forth are who we are in heart, and exactly why the Lord came!

We are taught in this parable, contrary to the elder brother, that there is great joy in the conversion of a sinner who come to Christ, and we must rejoice also.

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Conclusion

Let us live in a state of repentance, of confessing our sins to one another and to God through Christ, for the Gospel is reconciliation, not alienation. The way to deal with our sins in our relationships with God and with one another is **by confessing them, not excusing them**, and by offering restitution. **We offer restitution to God by offering the death of His Son** to Him and by giving ourselves to Him in humble service. **We offer restitution to man** by asking for forgiveness and by making right what we have done wrong. Honesty to others and to ourselves is what we need to make relationships work, and when we inevitably sin, we must be humble, confess, make things right, and we must accept such from others and not harbor grudges. If God accepts our repentance, so must we accept the repentance of others. One of the paradoxes of the Christian life is that a perpetual yearning after pardon makes for peace with God and with other people. In this story, the most incredible depravity of sin is overwhelmed with the infinite display of grace and love. Let us give our sins to Jesus who died on the Cross for them and raised Himself from the dead.

Then this parable illustrates:

“I say to you that likewise there will be **more joy** in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance” (Luke 15:7).

Amen.