



INTRODUCTION

For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

John 1:17

Jesus embodied the tension between grace and truth. Churches and Christians should too, but they tend to swing toward one or the other. It's easy to be a church of truth or a church of grace—to be conservative or liberal. But when churches take either of those routes, we can sense that something is wrong, something's missing.

WEEKLY READING

Wherever Jesus went, he was followed by tax collectors and sinners—all the worst people in his society. The marginalized, messed-up, and hated flocked to Jesus. People who were nothing like him, liked him. Imagine if, today, people like that flocked to the church. They should. If the church acted like Jesus, they would.

The religious leaders of Jesus' day complained that all these sinners were always around him. They assumed his proximity to these sinners meant that he condoned their sin. But Jesus never worried about being found guilty by association. Instead, he fully embodied God's truth and God's grace.

It's among a crowd made up of both sinners and religious leaders that Jesus takes the opportunity to tell his most famous parable¹: the prodigal son. In the story, found in Luke 15, a man had two sons. One was a behavior; the other was a misbehavior. The misbehavior asks for his inheritance right away, as though his dad were already dead. The man gives his son the money. The young man sets off on his own and

WEEKLY READING (Continued)

squanders the wealth that his father had worked for years to amass. Eventually, he found himself in dire straits. The only job he could find was tending to pigs. He even ate their slop.

Humbled, the misbehaving son decided to return to his dad's home and beg to be taken back—not as a son, but as a servant. Scripture tells us what happened next:

“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. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.”

Luke 15:20b–24

Both the sinners and the Pharisees listening to Jesus understood the point he was making about God's radical grace—that even when we insult and dishonor him in the worst way, he celebrates our return instead of meeting us with scorn and I-told-you-so's.

The Pharisees in the crowd responded the same way that the man's behaving son did: with self-righteous resentment that his repentant brother wasn't met with judgment. But the father in the story explains:

“‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 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.’”

Luke 15:31–32

Regardless of our sin, God could not love us more. Nothing we do can cause him to love us less.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Most of us are familiar with the parable of the prodigal son. Did the message give you a different perspective on the story? If so, talk about what you learned.
2. When you read the story of the prodigal son, do you relate more to behaving or misbehaving brother? Why?
3. Do you worry that when the church welcomes sinners it appears to condone sin? How should the church manage that tension?
4. Read Romans 3:23–24. What insight do these verses provide about the Pharisees and sinners in the crowd listening to Jesus?
5. Think of a person who needs your grace. What can you do to soften your heart toward that person and demonstrate God’s love?

MOVING FORWARD

If the church is to embody both truth and grace as Jesus did, we can’t respond to repentant sinners with the self-righteous disgust displayed by the Pharisees. Like Jesus, sin should break our hearts because it breaks people. Repentance should stir our hearts. We should do everything we can to make it easy for those who are turning to God.

CHANGING YOUR MIND

“In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Luke 15:10