

The Gracious Father and His Proud Son—Luke 15:25-32—8/23/26

Copyright by Mark Vaughan 8/2026

Open to Luke 15 & let's begin again this week by reading this chapter that includes a compelling story that points us to the character of God.

I pray it's timely to meditate on God as our gracious Father.

Follow along with me now as we read all of Luke 15. [READ]

That last verse says it was necessary to celebrate & rejoice.

Does the salvation of one sinner compel you toward such glad praise?

Do you sense a necessity to rejoice, like celebration must flow because your heart resonates with the gladness in God's heart?

This chapter reminds us not to let the busyness & burdens of life in this fallen world drain out that joy of God.

We don't want to miss the delight of God's grace to us.

God is always happy and a relationship with Him is the only fountain which can forever fully supply our joy.

And Luke 15 proclaims God's joy three times in the repentance and restoration of a lost sinner to faith in God.

Far more than celebrating the recovery of one lost sheep or rejoicing in finding one lost coin, God shares His joy in the rescue of one lost soul.

We see that in verse 7 & verse 10 in the first 2 stories & again in the father's response to his son's return in the third story.

As we saw last week, the younger son is called the prodigal, meaning the waste, depicting the empty pursuit of happiness apart from God.

But the older son also did not find glad rest in God.

So this parable is about far more than just the two sons.

We dare not miss that God is the hero as the father in the story whose character is illustrated in dealing with both sons.

Both sons were proud, but the prodigal's pride was humbled as he repented of his sins & turned to trust his father.

Yet the older son remained anchored in his pride.

So last week we outlined 4 ways Jesus illustrated God's graciousness through the father in this story & now today we will add 2 more.

Today we will uncover 2 more ways that Jesus used this story to show how gracious our God is.

Last week we began by noting how God is gracious in His generosity.

God is generous as the father was with the younger son.

Although his younger son did not deserve his share of the estate, God gave it just as God gives to all life & breath & all things to enjoy.

Every good taste and smile and pleasure in our physical, emotional, & relational experience is a gift from God.

Yet the younger son is a picture of the rebel who wants to be free from responsibility or accountability & who rejects any sense of honor.

Jesus framed this younger son that way for a reason—He was shocking the sensibilities of those listening.

The younger son was an illustration of the tax-collectors & sinners mentioned in verses 1-2 that were coming to Jesus & eating with Him.

And in the shame-and-honor culture of the ancient near east, he was far worse than what we realize today.

The son's inheritance was from generations of hard work and it was to be kept in the family under his father's oversight until his father died.

And the son was to love and honor his father by cherishing the relationship of working with his dad.

But this younger son wanted none of that—he basically was telling his dad to go ahead and die so he could get his stuff.

He did not want to care for the family & keep up the business.

He just wanted the money to go far away as fast as possible.

Since that kind of selfishness is sadly accepted today, it's nearly impossible for us to feel the weight of this wickedness.

Maybe it's like someone killing their parents & selling all their parents owned & moving to another country.

Even that illustration misses the living shame of the father.

In Jewish thinking of that time, the right answer of the father would have been to scorn his son for such a request.

But Jesus says the father gave the request & the son cheapened it all by a quick sale & then ditched everyone.

No one did such a thing—this would've shocked everyone listening.

But they would not have been surprised to find that the younger son's sin turned sour.

He may have had friends when the money flowed, but without it he was left alone in darkness and despair.

That's what eventually happens if you chase the world's lies.

Then hard times get harder like the famine in the story illustrates.

The younger son sunk so low that he yearned to eat indigestible hog slop that was ceremonially unclean & forbidden for Jews.

But realize something—Jesus described this guy as the worst of the worst to give hope to the worst of sinners.

So listen—there is hope for me & you too if we remember the character of the father like the younger son in the story did.

He was awakened to how generous & trustworthy his father was & he turned away from his sin to return to his father.

He knew that no matter what his father required, his father could be trusted even with the lowest day laborer.

He knew he deserved nothing, but he submitted himself to his father.

That's a model of repentance & faith that is celebrated.

Repentance is turning away from self & sin to trust God as He has revealed Himself in Christ as gracious to forgive & restore.

Those are the 2nd & 3rd points we noted about how gracious God is—God is gracious in His forgiveness & restoration.

Last week, we said point #2, God is gracious in His forgiveness & point #3, God is gracious in His restoration.

The father was looking for the estranged son like God is seeking sinners to welcome them home to Him.

The father saw him a long way off & was moved with compassion to run to him & lavish affection on him.

Then before the son could finish his repentant plea and ask for a job, the father began to pour out his gracious welcome.

The honored robe, the family ring, and sandals of responsibility put him back into the family and then the celebration began.

Like the father, God is happy to welcome repentant sinners.

He does not require restitution paid back to get welcomed.

Instead, He takes our shame on Himself like the father in the story who raised his robe & took off running to his lost son.

That was not done in that culture, but it protected his son from shame in the village when he returned.

The father sacrificed to save his son and declared him alive again by restoring him to the family with full sonship.

That illustrates how God is gracious in His forgiveness & restoration.

God took the shame of sinners by sacrificing His Son to pay sin's penalty to gladly welcome the repentant in His family.

And God shares His joy like this father did in this celebration.

So we noted 4thly last week that God is gracious in His joy.

God is gracious in His generosity, forgiveness, restoration, & joy.

We covered those 4 observations last week in the father's relationship with the younger son in the story.

Today we want to learn some lessons from the older son in the story.

So let's pick up reading again in verses 25-26. [READ]

I need to be clear here that the older son does not represent a Christian.

He was around his father, but he did not love & trust his father.

The move from the younger to the older is like the move from the sin of Gentiles in Romans 1 to the sin of Jewish moralists in Romans 2.

The conclusion of that section is in Romans 3—that all are under sin, that none are righteous, that all have sinned.

That's the same conclusion dramatized here—both sons are sinners.

Obviously, the younger son defected from the father—but the older son also had no relationship with the father.

When the younger son shamed his father by leaving, we did not find the older son caring about his father or the family honor.

And when the father restored his younger son, the older son was off on his own, distant from the father in heart & location.

I mean, if the older son was known for his love for his father, someone would've rushed to tell him when his dad broke out in holy joy.

But he had no relationship with his father.

He just wanted to keep his duties, be honored in the community, & get the inheritance so all would be well with him.

He did not care about his lost brother like his father did.

So he did not know about the party until he came in for the day.

And since the father still governed the estate, this party's cost was coming from what would've gone to the older son.

So suspicions brewed as the older son asked a servant what was up.

And the word for that servant indicates that he asked a young boy who was outside the party rather than going into the party.

Get that—if the older son loved his father, he would’ve asked him.

But read verses 27-28 to recall what happened next. [READ]

The older son did not like how his resources were being spent and he was offended at his father showing mercy.

The loss of control and prominence and stuff were his concerns as he rejected his father’s joy.

His response was one of anger—anger at the father’s joy.

Self-absorption & disdain for the father resided in the heart of the older son & there was no love or honor for the father.

Anger and fear and self-protectiveness and pride and suspicions and stinginess all rule a heart like this older son.

This is the proud heart of the religious moralist like the self-righteous Jewish leaders noted in verse 2 listening to Jesus.

Read verses 1-2 of this chapter again. [READ]

Do you see the wisdom of Jesus in crafting this story?

The repeated complaint by the Pharisees & scribes was that Jesus welcomed & ate with tax-collectors & sinners.

But as Jesus said in Luke 19, He had come to seek & save the lost & that mission came straight from God’s heart of joy.

So note here that the older son was not the good one—he was lost & estranged from the father even though he lived close by.

And Jesus’ point was that the scribes and Pharisees were like the older son and they would’ve known that.

In their minds, they had kept the all rules like the older son had.

They may have been proud of the older son’s criticism of such lavish grace given to such a shameful younger son.

To them, such grace was not honorable because they could not work for it or control it or make a list of rules to define it.

So they were far from the heart of God by not seeking and celebrating God’s grace for themselves or for others.

But realize that as Jesus spoke to them, God was pleading with them to repent of their sin and enter God’s joy.

Jesus did not tell this story merely to make them mad.

As the father in the story came to his angry son who was dishonoring him & rejecting his joy, so God was coming to them in Jesus.

Just as the younger son had shamed his father by departing, so the older son was shameful in not entering his father’s joy.

But as the father modeled God going out to the younger son, so the father modeled God reaching out even to a hypocrite.

Do you see that word in verse 28?—Pleading.—Let’s note that as a 5th overall demonstration of God’s graciousness.

As 1st point today & 5th overall—God is gracious in His pleading.

God offers the grace of His Gospel even to religious moralists.

The father displays point #5 that God is gracious in His pleading.

Jesus showed how God, like the father in the story, did not leave the proud older son to stew in his miserable anger.

Though the older son had no desire to enter the father’s joy, the father came out of the party to speak with him.

And he did not immediately condemn him—instead, he was urging, imploring, entreating, & inviting him.

The father came alongside that older son to summon him & to encourage & speak kindly to him to call him to come in.

That's who God is even with the smug & self-assured who look down on others.

That is God's posture of mercy reaching out.

And by the way, Dads, that should also be our posture.

As parents & siblings & evangelists with everyone, we want to be like this father extending the offer to enter the joy of God.

God is the holy & exalted Judge, but He also takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked as Ezekiel 18:32 & 33:11 say.

We can hold up the majestic sovereignty of God while also holding out the kindness of God that leads men to repentance as Romans 2:4 says.

And the proof of sinfulness of the Jews in Romans 2 is a fitting reminder of what the older son did not see about himself.

So this story was part of God calling the religious hypocrites to see their sin & turn from self-righteousness to trust God for grace.

But read verses 29-30 to see the heart of a hypocrite. [READ]

This kind of hypocrite professes & parades his outward conformity to the rules while he churns inside with self-will & rebellion & greed.

He may appear good, but below the surface, he is angry & fearful, criticizing others & isolating lest he be found out.

To protect himself, the hypocrite highlights his religious or moral activities like the older son in the story did.

The son basically said, "Look, behold, how good I've been."

Such a command spoken to his father was even more dishonoring.

Imagine standing before the holy & perfect God, commanding Him to take note of how you kept all His commands.

That is atrociously arrogant, but it is typical of anyone who is self-righteous & defensive, anyone who looks to justify himself.

Then this older son ungratefully described his life alongside his father as slavery, as serving like a slave—*douleo* in Greek.

So his bitter heart came out with no joy or love or thankfulness.

This life near his father was all duty, all a laborious chore of dreadful drudgery doing the stuff required.

The older son was just as selfish and dishonoring as the younger son—he just chose to pursue it in a different way.

His way was the moralist way, the look-at-how-good-I-am way that was the typical of the Pharisees.

And his self-righteousness was explicitly stated—he kept all the rules.

He said he never passed by one command—he never transgressed any warrant, never disobeyed any expectation.

With such pride in himself, he felt entitled to recognition & rewards.

So he indicted the father for not noticing his performance.

Have you or I ever done anything like that toward God?

Certainly, anyone who trusts his or her works to gain entrance into heaven or acceptance with God is acting like this, right?

Every false religion teaches people to approach God like the older son.

Only the biblical Gospel teaches an approach to God that knows we deserve only judgment, yet we seek Him for mercy.

That is salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

Yet the repulsive arrogance of this older brother can also creep into our thinking in subtle ways that we may not be aware of.

How about this?—have you ever thought or told God what you have done to seek Him & why He owes you answers to your prayers?

Have you ever complained that you should be receiving something better than what you have?

Have you ever thought or said, “Well, I’ve never done what they did” as if you’ve never been as bad as someone else?

Have you thought you’ve done enough for God or His church or other people or that you know enough of God or His Word?

May I suggest that we all face temptations to sin like the older son just as we also face temptations to sin like the younger son?

The older son even claimed that he was not wrong in refusing to enter his father’s joy in the celebration.

Yet that kind of self-protection & self-defense can arise so quickly.

When we are accused or exposed, what are we tempted to do?

To retaliate, right?—to point out others’ sins as bigger than ours.

That was next as the older son turned on the father and began to attack the father for what HE had NOT done.

He said his father never gave him goat to celebrate with his friends.

In saying that, the older son implied that he had other friends and did not wish to share any joy with his father.

He was not a friend of the father who could celebrate with his father.

He had other friends, not including his father.

Therefore, all the fattened calves he had eaten in the presence of his father in all of life’s celebrations & festivals were counted as nothing.

Those were slavery—those were not joyful for him.

So he minimized every other gift & meal & festival & celebration.

Then he exaggerated that he had never been given a smaller feast—a goat—to enjoy apart from the family, on his own.

And his point was how wrong the father was.

And more so, he implied that the father had wasted the fattened calf on the younger son who was obviously undeserving.

The older son saw himself as imminently deserving of the best and his brother as unworthy of anything.

So he accused his father of being unjust & unfair & wasteful & foolish to kill the fattened calf for his brother’s return.

The younger son had eaten up the life savings of the father so the older son protested the spending of a dime on his return.

The older son did not like such grace, especially if it cost him.

It’s almost like the older son here just wished his dad had died so he wouldn’t have lost the cost of this party on his brother.

He could've had it all to himself and never shared it.

He even referred to his younger brother as the father's son—this son of YOURS, heaping contempt on his father for owning such a rebel.

And though the fattened calf was killed to share the father's joy, to honor the father, the older son rejected that.

Do you see how the older son was certainly not the good one?

Of course, he thought he was the good one.

Out of his mouth came years of self-justifying grumbling & ungrateful arrogance that was covered so he could get what was coming to him.

But it was all uncovered in this conversation as the older son showed that inside he was a self-serving hypocrite.

At this point, we might want the father to tell the older son to take off to a distant land and not come back until he repents.

But that's not the picture of God Jesus gave as He ended the story with one more plea of the father in verses 31-32.

Read along with me in verses 31-32. [READ]

Despite the disrespect, the father responded with a tender appeal to recognize that he had always been available.

The father graciously assured the son that all he had was his son's.

He was graciously pleading yet again by appealing to the obvious kindness & benevolence the son always had.

Then he shared his joy & invited this son to enter his joy also.

Like God does, this father continued to reach out even when he was offended & dishonored.

Jesus depicted how God is gracious in His patience—that's point #6.

That's overall point #6—God is gracious in His patience.

God is gracious in (1) His generosity, (2) His forgiveness, (3) His restoration, (4) joy, (5) pleading, & point (#6) His patience.

That's who God our heavenly Father is that's the kind of father I want to be with God's help.

Dads & moms & all Christians—that's the heart of God we want to display to kids & all people as we represent our God.

We want to model the patience of God.

If only his son would throw off his pride and receive the grace of the father offering him all that is part of relationship with him.

But the son did not want it, just as any hypocrite does not.

We might imagine hypocrites like the older son saying, "I'm not the emotional type like others to get all excited."

They may say, "That's just not my personality; I'm not like those super spiritual people because my story is different."

Yet under such excuses may be bitterness brewing as they try to look godly while they pine away inwardly in fear or loneliness.

They criticize others to make themselves feel better & react defensively when questioned.

They might even claim that others see them as the prodigal, but at least they are not like those hypocrites who think they're so spiritual.

But in reality, that kind of thinking is another way of self-exaltation like the older son.

And while we're describing such hypocrites, let's again admit that such temptations are not just for other people—we face them too.

So we want to let Scripture expose our sins & warn us & truly free us to celebrate the glad grace of God.

We don't want to miss the grace of God and the joy of God because those go together—God takes delight in showing His grace.

That's again the theme that the story ends with in verse 32 where the father said it was necessary to celebrate.

When a lost sinner is found, heaven joins God in celebration.

That's the God in Jesus Christ revealed in this chapter.

He has condescended to earth to take the shame of sinners like us, whether religious or irreligious, whether moralists or prodigals.

God came in Christ to save all kinds of sinners, but the key is that we must see our sins against Him as they truly are.

We must see our foolishness and pride and ingratitude and selfishness and repent and turn to God in Christ instead.

The way into God's joy is to turn from both self-righteousness and rebellion & to trust Jesus's righteous life & atoning death.

Trust who Jesus is & what He has done on the cross & rising again and submit your life to follow Him.

That is the call from this story of 2 sons & the gracious father.

Jesus told this for worst of the worst & for those who thought they were the best of the best.

The path to joy is the path of humbly receiving God's grace.

Wherever you see yourself in this parable, see God pleading with you.

Maybe you see your history in church littered with older brothers and younger brothers that have tempted you to throw it all away because you detest the rebels and the self-righteous.

But realize that we are all like them in more ways than we realize and that the presence of hypocrites does not negate the goodness of God.

God is still who He says He is in His Word no matter who you have met that may have turned you off.

And this story lacks a full and clear ending because the door was still open for the scribes and Pharisees to repent.

So seize the chance today to repent and watch God write a newly transformed next chapter in your story.

And then pursue the joy of God in celebration—don't hold back in celebration of Him and His grace.

Sing with passion and delight and don't worry about what other people think about how happy you are in God.

And don't worry what others think of your relentless pursuit of God's joy in seeking to lead more sinners to repentance and faith in Christ.

If you want to enjoy God's joy, share it and pray for Him to give you the delight of Him rescuing souls through you.

What a great way to seek divine pleasure!

Pray with me as we close.