

The Gracious Father & His Prodigal Son--Luke 15:11-24—8/16/27

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Open your Bibles & let's begin by reading Luke 15:1-32. [READ]

As the summer travel season winds down, I thought we could meditate on the character of our God for a couple of weeks.

We're going to look at this passage that I pondered preaching in June when we merged from two services back into one.

That Sunday was a week after Fathers' Day & I wanted to soak in the character of God as our perfect heavenly Father.

That is greatly needed when the value of faithful fatherhood is so often maligned, misunderstood, & unappreciated.

The entertainment industry has long made fathers the focus of disrespect & mockery & the 21st century mainstreamed phrases like toxic masculinity to further the war against fatherhood.

But as much as people try, they cannot escape the reality that God made man & woman in specific order with wise purpose before sin.

And God has revealed Himself as our heavenly Father for reasons that He has hard-wired into the fabric of humanity.

So our concept of fatherhood is a foundational influence on how we approach God & all human relationships.

And today I want to renew the fundamental reality of what it looks like to have a father who loves us.

Luke 15 stands out as a compelling illustration of God's gracious Fatherhood with a beautiful example of trusting Him.

As I've studied Scripture & aged in life, I've been impressed increasingly with how impactful Jesus' teaching there can be.

As we walk through the 1st part of the parable today, we'll outline 4 points revealing the gracious Father that our God truly is.

We'll also see some sad & ugly responses to the father that can expose similar sins in our own hearts & lives.

Those wrong responses look very different with the 2 sons, but the consistent character of a gracious father shines forth in both situations.

That really is the point—we see the joyful heart of God as the heavenly Father who celebrates welcoming repentant sinners.

The compassion & kindness & patience of God are on display in the parable through the father's interactions with two different sons.

We will take a week to learn lessons from each relationship.

We will meditate on the gracious father & his prodigal son this week.

And kids—that word **prodigal** describes the younger son's wastefully extravagant, lavish spending.

Then next week we will study the gracious father & his proud older son & we'll see how **both** sons were proud in different ways.

And I pray that Luke 15 gives you hope no matter what.

If you feel lost—if you feel covered in shame & wish you could crawl into a hole or wish you could totally remake yourself, then listen.

Or if you feel tired of dealing with lost people, exhausted over their issues, wishing they would get it together, then listen.

No matter what is going on inside, see the God revealed in Luke 15.

As you do, I pray you will be invigorated with this striking display of our God & a clear picture of how to respond to Him.

Read Luke 15:11-19 again to start to see the first part. [READ]

To rightly value the overflow of God's joy in the chapter, we must feel the weight of the serious offenses of sinners.

So first be shocked by the self-absorbed sin of the younger son.

When we read of this son wanting his share of the estate, we mostly think that he wants money to go chase his dreams.

But this is far more than a mere request for money.

This is an uncaring, ungrateful insult to his father & a rejection of any relationship with his father who has provided everything for him.

This is a slap in his dad's face, implying that all his father is good for is the money he has and the gifts he can give.

There is no 'thank-you', no love, no humility or affection.

Basically, this was like saying he wished his dad would die so that he could have his money and stuff as his inheritance.

He wanted what was coming to him with no care for his father as the generous owner of all that had been given and would be given.

And in the culture of shame and honor among the Jews, this was absolutely unthinkable.

This shameful request by the son would bring further shame to the father if he did anything other than shame his son for asking.

But that's not what this father did—to the shock of listeners, the father gave this wicked, ungrateful son what he asked for.

The father did not immediately punish his son or kick him out with nothing or remove him from any inheritance at all.

This father's generosity was superlative & it was also scary.

It is scary to get what you want when your wants are not good & right.

It's scary to be given over to your desires when you want your own way without the loving guidance & protection of God & those He has given to care for you.

Being free from authority & accountability is judgment, not blessing.

Of course, this parable is not a roadmap for how God handles every situation in our lives or in our families.

And this parable is not meant to show parents the perfect steps to follow in handling every prodigal situation.

It's meant to show the sinful disregard for relationship with the father & the proud, ungrateful selfishness of such sins.

The son took his dad's death certificate & then the son did not set up shop next to dad to work alongside him with new investments.

Instead, since the older brother would've received two-thirds of the inheritance, this younger brother took his one-third & gathered it all & cashed it for far less than it was worth.

Since any investor would have to wait for the father's death to possess it all, the son had to get far less because he sold it fast & easy.

So he cheapened it & then took off quickly & moved far away.

If the first insult was not enough, his distant departure made it worse.

And then he wasted it all—he squandered it on loose living, on wasteful, reckless wickedness that included prostitution.

But sinful, self-absorbed living never satisfies for long.

So it came to an end and this younger son began to be in need.

In that desperation, he grabbed onto some stranger like a beggar and was sent off to the defiling, degrading work of pig care.

That may not seem defiling to you, but it certainly is messy.

If you've ever been around hogs, you know there's a reason we have clichés and proverbs using pigs as illustrations.

But for Jews who did not even eat pork, it was unheard-of to wallow in the mire with pigs or do any work with swine.

And this prodigal struggled to get his hungry mouth in among the hog feed to get the carob pods that were not even digestible for humans.

Then in his emptiness and dying need, the light bulb went on.

He realized that he could get a job as the lowest laborer for his father and survive far better than he was in that distant land.

And in thinking of his father's character with his servants, he realized he could trust his father as faithful and good.

So he repented—he turned from his wicked ways & his self-trust & spurning of his father's love & he determined to return to seek mercy.

And it was clearly mercy he determined to seek—he knew he did not deserve any blessing his father may give, even a job.

He was not returning home to demand or expect anything.

This was not entitlement or expectation of what was due him.

He was merely headed there to seek the kindness of his father and express his sorrow and repentance.

He resolved to confess his sin against God in heaven & against his father & to be clear he was not worthy to be called a son.

Since he knew his father's generous heart & faithfulness, he longed to simply see if he could simply enlist as a day laborer.

So that's what he did according to verse 20.

But before we move on, let's consider what is revealed here in verses 11-19 about God and about us.

Let's note a 1st point about God in what's revealed so far & state 1st that God is gracious in His generosity.

Point #1 about God as the father in this parable is that this reveals how God is gracious in His generosity.

God is the great Provider, the all-sufficient Supplier, the overflowing fount of every blessing for humans made in His image.

Here that is depicted by the father providing without any recognition to begin with.

Even when he is dishonored & unappreciated, the father is generous.

That doesn't mean God is spineless & never has any justice or consequences for those who reject Him.

We dare not overextend the parable beyond its main thrust.

But this illustrates God not being honored or thanked.

The father of this story is likened to God and people are like the sons.

That's not because all people are born as children of God in a right relationship with Him as their Father.

No. That would also be reading too much into the parable.

But all people are created by God and given everything from God in lavish goodness like this father did.

Yet all people are **also** like this younger son by not recognizing God or giving Him thanks, to use the words of Romans 1.

People take God's gifts assuming He owes them & they invest those gifts of money, time, talents, everything into serving self.

We all do it—we use God's blessings to chase pleasure or pride or worldly recognition or money or whatever else apart from God.

This younger son is the poster-child for youthful rebellion.

It's the folly that says to loving accountability: *'Stop telling me what to do! Give me my freedom & get off my back so I can do things my way.*'

It's the self-will and proud lack of submission to God's loving authority that can come at any age or stage of life.

The younger son pictures the cry today saying *'Get away from me with your rules or your expectations and let me get as far away from people who know me as I can so I can be who I want to be!*'

And it's **shockingly foolish** to believe you'll be happy if you run from God's design and chase your own dreams.

That always ends with life looking like a train wreck.

How many stories in history tell how worldly fame & fortune or athletic or academic success turned bitter & end empty?

So what if you win the title or gain honors or make the news if your life & relationships are a wreck & your sin plagues you all alone?

That may be more obvious in cases like this younger son, but it can happen in far more subtle ways.

When godly oversight & biblical counsel are discarded or avoided or issues pushed under the rug, the result is some kind of train wreck.

Of course, if you rest on your own morals & don't see yourself in this younger son at all, you are far worse off than you think.

That view of yourself would put you in the category of the older brother and the story does not end well for the older brother.

But if you see yourself and your sin like the younger brother here, then there is hope for you—much, **glorious hope**.

Note that the younger brother became sick of his sinful life.

He came to see that what he had chased was empty promises, that what he had believed were lies.

He remembered his father's goodness & faithfulness to all he knew.

So his return to his father was a return of faith.

He returned to his father because he **believed** that living in service of his father as his master would be a blessed and happy arrangement.

And that's the path of turning to God in repentance from sin.

We become sick of our sin, distrusting the lies we believed about ourselves and our dreams and our worldly pursuits.

Then we turn to God because we trust **Him**.

We see God as a good Master we will gladly serve if He accepts us.

We go to God seeking a right relationship with Him because He is who we really trust and want to serve.

Yet we don't go demanding anything.

We go confessing sins & admitting we are not worthy to be accepted.

We turn to God seeking mercy, telling God that based on His character we long for Him to accept us into His service.

That is the acceptable approach to God our Creator.

It is an approach of repentance, of turning away from sin and turning to God in faith that wants a right relationship with Him.

It's giving up on the self-driven life to submit to the God-directed life.

We know repentance is the point illustrated in the younger son because repentance is mentioned twice earlier in the chapter.

As Jesus taught in this setting, He mentioned in verse 7 the joy in heaven of one sinner who repents.

Again in verse 10, the parable is climaxed with joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

But here's the catch—turning to God is obviously right—but that's still uncertain if we don't know what God will do in response, right?

I mean, a lot of religions tell you to clean your act up & follow their god & yet they leave you unsure if God will accept you.

Even false versions of Christianity urge a change of behaviors to do works or rituals, but they still lack certainty of full & final welcome.

So does Jesus offer any hope or assurance that God will receive those who repent and come to Him in faith?

How is the holy God of righteousness & justice postured toward such sinful creatures who have walked away from His goodness?

Jesus depicts God eagerly awaiting their return & running to welcome their repentance with far more grace than imagined.

Let's read again the next section that displays that character of God.

Follow along now in Luke 15:20-24. [READ]

Point #2 to learn about God here—God is gracious in His forgiveness.

God is depicted in this father as watching for his son, initiating reconciliation, eager to forgive.

Like God came in Christ to die for us, God is a gracious Father who is ever moving toward His children to reach us & love us first.

So we note 2ndly today that God is gracious in His forgiveness.

Verse 20 says the younger son got up and came to his own father and then what happened first?

His father saw him while he was still a long way off—get that.

Wasn't this a busy man with more to do than watch a distant horizon?

What's implied here is that the father was watching for his son, eagerly longing for him to return.

The way the father was ready to run with feelings of compassion indicates that the father had not stopped thinking about him.

That word for feeling compassion means he was moved inside.

It means he felt deep down in his gut an aching burden for his son and his whole being felt deep concern in the pit of his stomach.

And those feelings were fueled by great love for his son that he had not been able to express with his son far away.

So verse 20 says the father fell on the neck of his son in loving embrace and kissed him repeatedly.

That was the father's posture—before the son ever spoke.

That was the initiative of the father going out to get his son and welcome him because he was watching for him.

But the father's love was also sacrificial because in that culture grown men didn't pull up their robes and run.

That simply was not dignified to expose your legs and take off in a passionate sprint—that was shameful.

And that is like God is taking the shame of the cross in Christ's death where God generously provided full atonement.

He is the God who would take such shame on Himself for the joy of welcoming lost children home.

But then watch how grace was lavished on the son further.

In verse 21, the son started his planned speech—he articulated his confession and repentance and his unworthiness.

But then he didn't finish what he'd planned to say—he had planned to seek the lowest day-laborer role.

He didn't deserve the place of a household servant or any dignified role, so he had planned to seek any available day-to-day labor.

That was his plan, but he never said it because his father had lavished mercy on him before he could ever get to that part.

And rather than insult his father's grace, he simply received that grace.

He did not insist on fixing his relationship with his father in his own way, by his own methods or labors to pay him back.

He trusted what the father said & received it—no doubts, just faith.

The father did not demand repayment or restitution; he forgave.

In response to the father's grace, the son stopped talking & trusted the father who then kept on pouring out more grace.

Now note here a 3rd facet of God's amazing graciousness—note #3 that God is gracious in His restoration.

3rd today, God is gracious in His restoration—God is gracious in His (1) generosity (2) forgiveness & (3) restoration.

Note the father's first word in verse 22—quickly—he wanted this son quickly lavished with all the blessings of sonship.

Those included literally the robe, probably the father's robe for special occasions, & a ring of family authority for sealing documents.

And then were the sandals worn by those with responsibility to round out the restoration of this son to his father's side.

This was full sonship, full provision, full restoration, no holding back.

This truth of God's love is something many people struggle to get in their issues with trust or authority or relationships.

Many of us are familiar with people who profess forgiveness of sin with their mouths but then continue to punish in other ways.

They keep up the cold shoulder or silent treatment or guilt trips so others learn to grovel or walk on eggshells.

That kind of wrong response breeds mistrust & uncertainty about whether forgiveness is real & if full restoration is possible.

But listen—that's not what God is like—so don't be like that in how you forgive or approach restoration.

But also, if you worry over whether God will accept you & whether your faith or repentance is enough or whether your sins are too great—see the grace of God here!

God is gracious in His generosity to give every smile & laugh & pleasure & provision you've ever enjoyed.

And though you & I fail to thank Him & honor Him & we run away & don't listen, look at who your heavenly Father is.

He is gracious in His forgiveness & in His restoration.

He is eager to forgive & He sacrificially seeks to show His love as we return to Him & He completely restores us as His children.

Since that's who God is, don't look to yourself.

Confess your self-disgust & turn to Him & Him alone by His grace.

And as you move toward Him, know & trust that He's waiting for you & running to embrace you.

That's who God is!—isn't that amazing?—it's amazing grace!

But it gets better—God is gracious in (1) His generosity, (2) His forgiveness, (3) His restoration & next (4) His joy!

Point #4—God is gracious in His joy.

God is happy to generously give & forgive & restore.

God is not a begrudging, angry actor who does it because He has to.

No. Instead, point #4—God is gracious in His joy.

This restoration was cause for great celebration by the father as verse 24 describes killing the specially prepared calf for eating.

The eating and drinking celebrated the renewal of life for a son that had been written off as dead to the family.

The lost son was found & the father was thrilled & happy & it was a time to revel in the father's joy—get that—the joy is the father's.

That's the father in this story and that's an illustration of our Creator God welcoming sinners into His family.

And by the way, dads, this is the kind of father we should want to be.

I want to be happy like my heavenly Father, delighted to love & forgive & restore & not remain irritated or angry or distant.

We should all want to be like this in all our relationships.

And we should also want to trust God as this gracious Father.

God is looking & waiting to lavish mercy on sinners who repent.

God is like this father in His initiative to seek sinners, to look for them and run to them and to embrace them with grace.

God is like this father moved with compassion for the helpless, hopeless plight of foolish rebels who have run away from Him.

He cares and is ready to receive you.

As we come to our senses in sorrow over sin and turn to trust this God as faithful and good, He is eager to welcome us.

He doesn't need to hire us or wait for repayment or restitution.

He lavishes us—He graciously forgives at his own expense and He bestows on us the full status of being his children.

And in His joy God throws a party of sorts in heaven, which is the most prominent, overarching point of this chapter.

Verse 1 of Luke 15 tells us that the tax-gatherers and sinners were coming near to Jesus to listen to Him.

Jesus was speaking to those groups of the worst of the worst, the rankest of the rebels, the societal scum—even to you & me.

And His point was that God is happy and heaven rejoices when one such sinner repents and comes to God in faith.

Like finding one lost sheep or one lost coin is cause for celebration, so far more is the rescue of one lost son.

What a message of hope for the sinners of society!

What a welcoming portrait of God to win the prodigal home!

This is a God who is glad to forgive, happy to show grace, delighted to receive the repentant into the privileges of His family.

And this God does so at great sacrifice to Himself—on His own initiative not reluctantly or because He has to do so.

This is the God who came to earth in the Person of Jesus Christ to seek and save that which was lost.

He lived perfectly here to display His own righteousness to give that to His children.

This is the God who exists as Three-in-One who could be the Son of God who came and the Father God who sent Him and the Spirit of God is still coming to souls to save them.

He is the God who endured the sacrifice of Jesus the Son on the cross to receive the wrath of the Father for our sin.

He is the God who would take such shame on Himself for the joy of welcoming lost children home.

And He is the God of Jesus' resurrection who proved that His victory extends beyond this life into eternity.

Why would you ever run from such a gracious and glorious God?

And if you have run or are running, why not stop today?

Stop chasing whatever else and turn to this open-armed God of grace revealed in Christ ready to embrace you into His loving arms.

Those are some lessons we can learn from the gracious father with his prodigal son in this story.

Next week, we'll learn from the gracious father & his proud older son.

But first let's soak in today's lessons for our response to God.

Let's turn from our selfishness & sins & trust this God who is so gracious in His generosity, forgiveness, restoration & joy.

Let's worship & follow Him today and forever.

And let's tell others about the compelling love & mercy of our God!

As I thought our expanded sanctuary after 25 years of ministry, I prized the extra room to welcome every prodigal back home!

We not only have room in our facility; we have room in our **hearts** as we soak in the heart of God for sinners depicted in this parable.

So pray for many lost souls to come to salvation & share God's joy in calling sinners to repent & be forgiven & restored.

What Father, so tender is calling us home—he welcomes the weakest, the vilest, the poor—Our sins they are many, but His mercy is more!

Let's pray God will lead many to Him—pray with me.