

This parable has traditionally been known as The Parable of the Prodigal Son, but it is about much more than the prodigal son. It is about two lost sons and an incredibly loving and gracious father. It is about the amazing grace of God that saved wretches such as we are. It is especially about the willingness of God to save sinners all of whom are profoundly unworthy of being saved.

In the story of Jesus that the gospels tell, there are two main categories of people who need to be saved. There are the religious people who think they are righteous and there are the tax collectors and sinners who know that they are sinners. The first two verses of Luke 15 mentions these two categories. "Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them.'" The three parables Jesus tells in Luke 15 are given in response to the grumbling of the Pharisees because Jesus was receiving and eating with sinners. And all three of them have to do with the joy in heaven over sinners who repent. The religious snobs were critical of Jesus for associating with people known to be sinners, but Jesus is making the point that these are the very people he came to save and when any of them do repent and turn to God, God rejoices and so do the angels in heaven.

The parable of the two lost sons and the strikingly gracious father addresses both the tax collectors and sinners and the Pharisees and scribes. It is a powerful portrayal of the sinfulness of sin and the gracious love of God in his willingness to save sinners.

First we consider the younger son. He is an incredibly hard-hearted and selfish person at the beginning of the story. He asks for his inheritance before his father is dead. In a situation like this with two sons, when the father died the elder son would receive two thirds of the estate and the younger son would receive one third. The younger son here is being terribly cruel by asking for his third of the estate before his father was even dead. He can't wait for his father die so that he can have his inheritance. He does not love his father. He wants the inheritance that he would normally receive when his father died, but he does not want to wait until his father is dead. Imagine how painful it would have been for the father to hear that demand.

But the father agrees. We are told, "And he divided his property between them." Here already he does not treat his son as he deserves. The son deserves to be driven away with nothing. He deserves to be disowned. But the father does not do that. He gives the son what he asks for.

And the son leaves. He takes his inheritance and leaves. He leaves home. He turns his back on his father. He goes far away. And there he "squandered his property in reckless living." He lives without restraint. He spends his money on prostitutes and on the lifestyle that goes with that. He is living as if there were no tomorrow. He does not think about his money running out. And predicably it does run out. At the same time there is a famine. His money is gone. He needs to find work. There are no good jobs to be found. And so he ends up taking the most degrading job – feeding pigs. For a Jew that would be the most humiliating job possible. And it does not pay well. He longs for pig feed to eat. And we are told, "No one gave him anything." The implication is that once his money was gone, his friends were gone too. He has hit rock bottom.

Finally he came to himself. That is how Jesus describes what happens next. "But when he came to himself..." Something changed in his thinking. He realizes that he has made a mess of his life. He realizes that his father's servants have it better off than he does. So he decides to go home. This is what he says to himself. "I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, Father I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants."

He has come to see that he has sinned against God and against his father. He has been humbled. He realizes that he is "no longer worthy to be called [the father's] son. And he asks to be treated as one of the hired servants of his father.

So who does the younger son stand for? How do we apply this part of the story? How does it apply to us? Well if we are believers in Jesus Christ, this part of the story refers to our history – to our past. We have repented our of our sins. The Father has embraced us. He is rejoicing in our repentance. We are part of the celebration that comes later. If we have not repented of our sins and turned to Jesus, we are still somewhere in this first part of the story. And the story is for us a call and an encouragement for us to repent.

But regardless of where exactly we are in the story, the story highlights certain truths about sin. And the first thing it highlights about sin is that it is personal. The father in the story represents God, and the younger son in the story represents sinners and the way that the younger son treats his father is a picture of how all of us treat God by nature. And even after we are saved there is still some of that because we still sin.

According to Jesus's teaching in this parable, one of the ways of looking at sin is a failure to love God and to want God's gifts instead of God himself. This is what is so striking about the younger son. He did not love his father. He wanted his father's property but he did not want a relationship with his father. Once he had what he wanted from his father, he left the father's house. And there is something of that in all sin. We want God's gifts without wanting God.

The way the younger son treated his father, helps us to see how we treat God when we love whatever it is we most love more than we love God. We love whatever it is we live for and our love for God is weak or nonexistent. This parable gives us a sense of how terrible it is for us to want what God gives us without loving God himself. If we are saved people, we have been given love for God, but it is often so weak that we can still see ourselves from time to time in the selfish cruelty of the younger son in the way he treated his father.

Then in the younger son's leaving of his father's house we see the tendency of sin to be free from restraint – to live as we please – to do our own thing. Perhaps there are those among us who are still living in this way – throwing off the restraints of the father and living as you please. But there is some of that in all sin. Every time we go our own way instead of the way of God's commands we are doing what the prodigal son did. To the degree that we sin we are going our own way.

And then consider where he ends up. Squandering his property. And ending up among the pigs. Even if we do not end up in the extreme circumstances that the younger son ended up in, we all know something of wasteful self-indulgence and we all know something of spiritual poverty and filth that is the result of our sins. We are not free from lust and greed and self-indulgence and selfishness and in those moments when we come to ourselves we realize that we are squandering our lives and the gifts that the Father gives us and we realize that there is something in that of living among the pigs. There is something unclean and degrading about us when we indulge in sinful pleasures and when we come to ourselves we see something of that.

The way that the younger son responds when he comes to himself gives us insight into what it means to repent. Repentance mentioned or described in each of the parables in this chapter. The theme that runs through all three of the parables in this chapter is that there is joy in heaven when a sinner repents. The description of the thoughts and words and actions of the son gives us insight into the nature and the experience of repentance from sin.

He comes to himself. He sees himself in a new way. Before he had been blind to the reality of his situation. Now he begins to see his sin for what it is. He realizes where his sin has brought him. Repentance has something of that in it. There is something of a realization that our sin has brought us into a bad place. The focus here is not so much on the danger as it sometimes is, but on the uncleanness, the degradation of sin. When we come to ourselves we feel unclean because of our sins. We feel shame for how we have treated the Father. We feel unworthy. That is what we see in the prodigal son when he comes to himself. He realizes something of the enormity of what he has done and what he has lost because of that.

Our Westminster Confession of Faith expresses this thought in its definition of repentance. In Chapter 15:2, it says when a person repents he sees and senses “not only the danger but also the filthiness and hatefulness of his sins.” This is what the Jesus’ description of the repentance of the prodigal son shows us so clearly. He says, “Father am no longer worthy to be called your son.” There is something of this in all repentance - a sense of unworthiness.

Jesus’ description of the repentance of the prodigal son also shows us how repentance includes a leaving of sin and a returning to the father. The prodigal son does not stay in the fields with the pigs. He returns to his father. He confesses his unworthiness to the father. And he asks to be treated as one of the father’s hired servants. Repentance is not only feeling in a certain way about our sins and our sinfulness, it is also about action. It is also about turning from sin. It is also about leaving the pigsty and returning to the father’s house.

What a moving picture of repentance! There is a sense of unworthiness. There is a confession of the inexcusable nature of one’s sin. There is a humbling of one’s self before God. There is a request for mercy. The prodigal son did not ask to be reinstated as a son. He would be happy to be treated as a hired servant. He just wanted to belong to the father’s house again.

Do you know something of this in your life? It is not necessary that we have lived a life of outward wickedness in order for us to feel what the prodigal son felt and expressed in his repentance. There is something of this in all genuine repentance. All sin makes us unworthy before God and there is something of that awareness in all repentance. When God opens our eyes to see the sinfulness of sin we all confess with Jeremiah 17:9 that our hearts are “deceitful above all things, and desperately sick.” Acknowledging that is part of what it means to repent. Do you know something of this in your life? And do you know something of turning from your sins – of leaving them behind – of fighting against them. The younger son left the pigsty. Our confession of faith includes this in its definition of repentance when it says that alongside of “seeing and sensing not only the danger but also the filthiness and hatefulness of his sins,” one who repents also “turns from all his sins to God ... and so grieves and hates his sins that he determines and endeavors to walk with God in all the ways that he commands.” (WCF 15:2). Is that also there in your life? Seeing sin for what it is and turning from it.

But the greatest point of the parable is the response of the father. Verses 20-24, “And he [the prodigal] arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, ‘Father I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, “Bring quickly the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and his found.’ And they began to celebrate.”

Jesus here is giving us a vivid picture to help us to understand and sense what he said in the other two parables in this chapter. There is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents. That is the point of this description of the father when he sees his son coming home from the pigsty of his sin. The parable shows so clearly and powerfully how horribly sin dishonors the Father. And the father’s response to his son’s return is such a powerful depiction of the love and compassion of the Father towards those who repent of their sins.

The father saw his son coming when he was still a long way off. God is looking for sinners to repent. Ezekiel 33:11 expresses this sentiment. Ezekiel writes, “Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord, God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?” 2 Peter 3:9 says that God does not wish “that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.”

What a beautiful picture that is of the father watching down the road for his son to come home! And what an encouragement it is for us to come to the father repenting of our sins. Certainly one of the points of the parable is to remove all hesitancy in coming to God in repentance because we feel unworthy or unclean. It is understandable if we feel that way because we are unworthy and unclean! It would be understandable if God would give us what we deserve, but the amazing point of the parable is that God is longing for sinners to come to him in repentance.

He sees his wayward son coming along way off because he has been looking down that road day after day longing to see his son return. And his great joy is expressed in that once he saw his son way down the road, he did not wait for the son to come before him but he “ran and embraced him and kissed him.” And then further when he the son had begun his speech of repentance he did not even let him finish but told his servants to organize a party of celebration. And he did not treat him like a hired servant. He received him back as his son. “For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost and his found.”

Now you may wonder where Jesus is in the parable. Where is Jesus dying to pay the penalty for our sins? It is not there. Parables typically make one point. They are not intended to give a comprehensive account of the gospel. They do not say everything that needs to be said. What we can say is that the great love and compassion and grace portrayed by the father in the parable is expressed in the God the Father sending his Son to suffer and die in our place.

The greatest expression of the love of God for sinners is that he sent his Son to suffer and die in our place. Jesus does not include all of that in the parable, but the love and grace of God in receiving sinners is also and supremely expressed in sending Jesus to suffer and die on the cross so that he might be able to welcome us in the way the father in the parable welcomed his wayward and repenting Son. This parable encourages us that God will receive us if we come to him in humility and repentance. But so does the fact that God sent his Son to be our saviour. As Paul expresses it in Romans 8:32, “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?”

The point is that God welcomes sinners who come to him confessing their sins. We can have every assurance that if we come to God as the prodigal son came to his father, we will be received in the same way.

Now the parable ends with the response of the elder son. The elder son represents the Pharisees and scribes who grumbled because Jesus received sinners and ate with them. The three parables in this chapter show how Jesus came to save sinners and how there is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents. The last part of the parable of the two sons and the gracious father describes the attitude of the Pharisees and the scribes.

The older son refused to join the celebration that was happening because his younger brother had repented of his sin and came home. He was angry that the father just accepted him back as a son and celebrated his home coming. When the father came out to entreated him to join the celebration he expressed his resentment to his father. “Look these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.”

The elder brother resented the grace that the father showed to his younger brother. He was not willing to rejoice at the repentance of his brother. He compared his many years of service to his father with his younger

brother's mistreatment of his father. And he noted that the father had never even given him a goat that he might celebrate with his friends.

How should the elder brother been serving his father in the light of Jesus' critique of him? What point is Jesus making about the elder brother and his attitude? The most prominent characteristic that Jesus highlights is his lack of love and grace towards his younger brother. He is not glad that his brother has repented. He is not willing to join the celebration. He resents that the celebration is even happening. He believes that the father is being unjust to him in that the father had never thrown a party for him.

I think that is the heart of the matter if you think about Jesus' portrayal of him in the context of the rest of the chapter. The Pharisees and scribes were grumbling because Jesus was "receiving sinners and eating with them." The three parables that follow all make the point that there is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents. In the parable of the two sons and the gracious father, the elder brother, grumbled because of the grace that the father was showing to the younger son. And all of that is rooted in a comparison that the elder brother makes between himself and his younger brother.

What Jesus is especially pointing out about the Pharisees and scribes in this parable is a combination of feeling superior to tax collectors and sinners and refusing to rejoice in the grace and mercy that Jesus was showing to them. What each of the parables shares is the note of joy over sinners who repent and the elder brother in the final parable is unwilling to share in that joy.

So as far as application is concerned, Jesus is warning us about our attitude towards the tax collectors and sinners of our day and whether we reflect Jesus' attitude towards them or whether we reflect the attitude of the scribes and the Pharisees towards them. Those, who in our day, would correspond to the tax collectors and sinners in Jesus time would be non-religious people, notorious sinners, those whom we as church people might be tempted to look down on and keep our distance from. If we see Christians who reflect Jesus associating with the notorious sinners of our time, do we approve or are we critical like the Pharisees were. And do we rejoice when they repent and turn to the Lord, or are we like the elder brother who refused to rejoice and celebrate when he younger brother repented and returned to his father.

Probably most of us will not feel too convicted by Jesus' description of the elder brother and Luke's description of the Pharisees. We have been shaped by these stories. We have been warned about the Pharisees all our lives. We know that we are sinners saved by grace and we do applaud those bring the gospel to notorious sinners and we do rejoice when we hear of them repenting and turning to the Lord. And if that is the case we should be thankful for that. We probably identify more with the younger son than the elder son.

But perhaps we will be convicted of sin when we consider the love of Jesus and the father in the parable for notorious sinners. Jesus was so passionate about the salvation of sinners that he was willing to spend time with them, getting to know them in order to preach the gospel to them. The father in the parable longed for

the return of his prodigal son. Day after day he looked down that road in the hope of seeing his wayward son return home. Perhaps our sin is not so much an unwilling to celebrate when notorious sinners are saved, but indifference about their lost condition.

And this brings us back to the wayward son. Maybe we do rejoice when sinners are saved. Maybe we do applaud when we hear of people who bring the gospel to the notorious sinners of our time. I would expect that we do given that we confess to be sinners saved by grace. But if we look at the love of Jesus for tax collectors and sinners and of the father for his wayward son, there is plenty to convict us of our sin and bring us back to the confession and repentance of the prodigal. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." We should care much more for the lost around us and of this world. If we think of Jesus along the tax collectors and sinners, we may not grumble, but his passion and love convicts us of the weakness of our own.

But there is also joy in heaven when we repent. When we confess our unworthiness and return to the father he is ready to embrace us as he embraced his wayward son. Let us take comfort in that. And from that place of security and acceptance seek to become more like Jesus in his passion for the lost.